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"Grave"

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We would like to welcome our newest staff member, Tamar Zeffren. We're excited to have her on board and look forward to working with her.

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If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will make a note on the corrections page for that issue. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please let us know, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

August 2005

As the summer break—or summer holiday, if you are from that side of the pond—winds to a close, we gladly bring you another issue of high fantasy and science fiction. Fill your minds with our magic and enjoy the wonderful fiction and art inside.

July beckoned in a new wave of Pottermania as J.K Rowling released her sixth Harry Potter novel and broke worldwide sales records in grand fashion. We at Deep Magic welcome the attention she has garnered for the genre and applaud her accomplishments. Our book reviews section focuses on *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*, and we invite you to add your opinion to the user review section of our book reviews website.

We also applaud our own authors and the wonderful stories they have shared with us, which we now bring to you. This includes a beautiful array of short fiction; "Raven Song" by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, "Book of the Strongest" by Jonathan Moeller and "Unless a Seed Dies" by David Eland. Likewise, for those of you who enjoy your fiction in longer doses, we continue the serialized fantasy novel, Shadowloom, by Mark Reeder.

We did mention art, as well. This issue boasts two incredible fantasy artists. The amazing cover image was created by Anders Finer, and an internal spread by Linda Tso adds color and life to our pages.

In addition to the fiction and art, you will also find two interesting and enlightening articles. The first one is titled, "Alternate History: Changing the Story After the Fact," by author Douglas Niles, who has written several novels exploring the possibilities of a history different than what we know. The second, "Twist and Turn" by Mike Loos, gives advice on creating a good twist to your story.

As always, your praise and criticisms are welcome and invited in our forums. Join our community of friends and fantasy fanatics and let us know your thoughts on this publication, our website, and the industry in general. The staff are regulars on the forums, and many of the authors are happy to discuss their works with readers there.

One last note before we let you explore the pages beyond: Do not forget to submit your stories to our July Writing Challenge/Contest for a chance at a cash prize and the honor of being declared our winner. Those stories are due August 10, 2005, and will be published in the September issue.

Thanks for coming by, and enjoy the issue.

Sincerely,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication.

To submit a challenge, go to our new online submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. Please note the deadline date below.

August 2005 Writing Challenge
Entries due Sept 10, 2005

Since this writing challenge concludes in October, we thought it only fitting that it be based in horror. Scary stories have been around from the beginning, but it truly is an art to craft a story that is not only scary, but holds up as a quality, coherent piece of storytelling. The challenge this month is simple: write either a scene from a longer story, the opening scene of a story, or a complete short story that uses elements of horror. Keep in mind Deep Magic's 'safe places for minds to wander' guidelines, but don't be afraid to put a scare in us. Keep the submissions to 1000 words or less.

Selections from the June 2005 Challenge

Bitter End
Shrike
Under the Big Top

The above stories were selected from the June challenge, which was to write a scene or short story focusing on developing characters through emotion.

Don't forget the July challenge due August 10:

This month we have a special challenge for our loyal readers/writers. Thanks to a gracious donation from Deep Magic staff member Mike Loos, the writing challenge is also a contest with a cash prize of $25.00. With this extra added incentive, we are asking a little more from you this month. Our challenge is a hybrid of previous challenges and article topics and will be stretched over two months. The subject of your assignment is the cover image for the September issue, which you can preview by clicking here. Your challenge is to use that image as inspiration for the beginning of a story. Write up to the first 1,500 words of your story in such a way that your readers will be hooked to read the second half. Whether you succeed or not in building sufficient tension, drama, and interest will, in fact, depend on a vote from the readers.

We will set up a poll in our forums for readers to vote from September first through the twentieth regarding which stories shall be published in full in the October issue. So, be ready with "the rest of the story." Total story length shall be under 5,000 words. Feel free to submit the entire story by August 10, 2005, or you may submit only the first portion (up to 1,500 words). If you submit the full story, please mark the break between your writing challenge entry and the rest of the story. If you only submit the first portion of the story, make sure you have the second half of the story ready for submission by September 1, 2005, for it to be included in the October issue. If we do not receive it by then, you will be out of the contest and subject to ridicule on the forums.

The winner of the $25.00 prize will be determined by a vote of the readers and staff at the end of the contest. All editors and Deep Magic staff are ineligible to enter the contest. However, we are not to be left out of the fun. The editors have been invited, encouraged and cajoled into participating in the challenge in a separate class. Their entries will be published and put to the vote in a separate category. The personal challenges are being levied and the gloves are coming off behind the scenes at Deep Magic, so help us decide which staff member is entitled to the bragging rights.

Bitter End

By Joshua G. Westfall

Jesh'Lem stepped up to the thick wooden door. His elation blocked all pain—his eyes sparkled with anticipation. His sword dripped with the fresh blood of the final dragon. He was done, finished; two years of fighting and waiting was about to end. Through the door waited his bride-to-be. Lassim was her name, the golden-haired angel whose love had sustained him through all the trials, tests, and valleys. Jesh'Lem could not help the tears coming to his eyes as his imagination drifted to watching Lassim walking down a church aisle with a long, flowing white dress and a beautiful smile. Jesh'Lem sighed slightly as he pushed open the door and presented himself to his love.

Though it was hard to see through the tears of joy, Jesh'Lem knew instantly something was wrong. His precious Lassim was there for sure, beautiful as ever, but she was embracing a young knight. Both the princess and the knight were lost to reality as they shared a kiss of pure love. Jesh'Lem started at the sight and choked slightly, his heart leaping into his throat. Lassim and the knight let go of each other slowly and stepped apart—only then did she notice Jesh'Lem.

"Jesh'Lem, what are you doing here?" she asked with a curious look.

"I came to…to…" Jesh'Lem couldn't finish the statement. Tears of pain, not of joy, began to swell as he looked down at the hair and silk cloth in his hand that had been his tokens of love from Lassim for the past two years.

"You thought I loved you? Oh, Jesh'Lem. You're a great person and a great friend, but I do not love you like that." Lassim almost chuckled, as if she had no concept of what Jesh'Lem had gone through for her.

"But…" again the words would not come. Jesh'Lem's heart was far too heavy.

"Jesh'Lem, I'm sure there's a perfect woman out there for you. You'll find her one day." With a delicate curtsy, Lassim took the hand of the young knight and they walked out of the room to the balcony where a Riding Eagle stood waiting. The knight helped Lassim up and got up himself. Without a second look, they soared into the sky and disappeared. Jesh'Lem fell to the floor, his armor resounding off the smooth stone surface. Leaning over, he gave a heavy sob. His mind swam, his heart was wrenched in pain, and bitterness shook his entire being. "Why?" was all Jesh'Lem could whisper before he collapsed and died.

It is said that even today, if you dare go to the Graza Stronghold, you will see a wraith there that is clothed in sorrow and wreathed in anguish. He wanders the stony halls always whispering, "Why? Why? Why!?" None who see him can ever be happy or ever again experience joy.

Shrike

By A.M. Stickel

His once rainbow-hued wings shredded and dulled to gray, King Pri's wilted corpse hung from the thorn tree. Circling his torn remains, Cliff Aerie's stricken occupants swarmed and bewailed his fate. Pri's queen, Laka, floated above them all. Rending her spider-silk gown, she set her curse upon the shrike who had impaled her mate.

The shrike's sharp hooked beak opened in harsh reply to the curse, her masked face pitiless. "Shack! Shack! You slew and ate my mate; I but return the favor." She crouched on her hatchling-filled nest atop the cliffs, awaiting a chance to strike again should the fairies try to remove Pri's body.

At last Laka's weary heart drew her and her companions to the mossy cliffs of their home behind the waterfall, high above the thorn tree. As the sun set on their sorrow, the huddled troupe glowed with friendly warmth, and all, save one, hummed soft-voiced reassurance.

The strident one strode forward and bowed to his queen. "Why not destroy every shrike in our land, my queen?" said Pri's brother, Tri. "We could begin by slaughtering the younglings of this evil huntress."

"Tri, you were the one who suggested that Pri hunt the he-shrike. Now you want us to go to war? My curse will kill my king's killer when the time is right. Besides, if she chooses to avenge her slain young, my own two children are at risk," said Laka, hugging her twins, Kri and Rala, close. The tiny prince and princess, a long way from fledging, had mere stubs for wings.

"The dishonor being mine, let me meet the she-shrike in single combat," replied Tri, deep pain and outrage welling in his green eyes.

"No, Uncle, no," begged his niece and nephew, bathing his hands with teary kisses, and adding, "Without Father, we need you to guide us."

Tri knelt and lifted the children's wet chins with gentle hands. "Kri, Rala, someday you will understand about honor. If no one else will deal with the shrike and her ilk, then I must." Tri's gaze encompassed the gathered adults and met the equal defiance of his queen.

"We will decide the matter on the morrow, after we have rested," said Laka, her fair face drawn and haggard, her wings trembling. "Come, dear children…"

The indifferent moon shone down on two restless royal children, awake long after the others had fallen into fitful slumber upon their mossy beds.

"Sister, how can we make Uncle see reason?" Kri put out his hand.

"We'll climb the wildrose vine to the bottom of the cliff, Brother. I have an idea that may save us all." Throwing off her leaf coverlet, Rala took his hand.

Before dawn, the cliff fairies awoke to the sight of the blazing thorn tree. The exhausted twins slept innocently in their bower with no one the wiser. And the shrike, deprived of her feast, abandoned her nest for safer haunts.

Under the Big Top

By Dwayne B. Frazure

It was a rare night when the big top was more than half full that Kip put away his torches, blades, and plates and sought out Randy Mandrake. Kip had always been a good juggler, an adequate sword swallower, and a competent plate spinner. Those were all fine traits that earned him a comfortable living in Randy Mandrake's Traveling Circus and Rummage Retailer. He had never risen above third billing, however, and now, the new fire eater threatened to bump him to fourth. He found Randy barking at the clowns to put the oversized trick wheel back on the carriage.

"Get the pin in, Moosafer!" Randy's face was already two shades redder than normal.

That should have warned Kip that this might not be the best night to approach his boss, but Kip had already stormed into the training workshop and would not look the fool for wilting in Randy's heat. Moosafer pounded the pin in the wrong hole.

"That'll hold the wheel on, you pimple-snouted hog! Pin it in the center!" Randy ripped the card he was holding and threw the pieces in the air. He spat twice before the paper hit the ground. That was when he saw Kip.

"I thought I'd see you tonight, you curl-lipped ape!"

Kip stormed across the open space until he towered over Randy. "Right as usual, boss."

"You're none too pleased about losing third to Roffi, eh?" Randy said, puffing hard on a weed cigar.

"She's a one-trick dog," Kip said. His hat fell to the ground, landing in a grease-spot. A curse reached his lips, but he bit it back.

"Yeah, but her one trick's better than all three of yours." More smoke. The clowns slipped out the door.

"Only to you, 'cuz hers is new to you."

"Her cheers were twice what you got. Besides, when was the last time you added anything new to your show?" This time the smoke plumed right into Kip's face.

Kip let his breath blow the smoke back down on Randy. "Her cheers are only louder 'cuz she wears naught but a sleeping dress."

This time the smoke came out of a curled smile. "A cheer's a cheer. And hers are bigger than yours."

Kip could not help but cough. He took a step back and balled his hand into a fist, recalling Roffi skulking around the boss's wagon the first week she joined the circus. He imagined how good it would feel to break the little man's nose. His arm twitched.

"Take a swing, ape, and see what happens," Randy said.

Kip backed away. Breaking Randy's nose would not be worth losing his job over, but something a little grander might be. He knew where Roffi kept her fire oils. He could set everything up before Randy reached his bed chamber. Everyone knew the boss could not go an hour without a smoke. If he were lucky, he would get Roffi too.

Raven Song

By Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

It was dusk when she stumbled, weary and aching, up to the town. Her pale, ill-cut hair stuck to her neck, her forehead, glued in place as her sweat dried suddenly in the now cool breeze. One of the straps on her pack had broken a few leagues back so it dangled, half empty, over one shoulder, bumping against her hip. At her waist hung a small, sparsely-filled coin purse. Hidden beneath her clothing was another purse, quite full. At her side in a shiny new-looking sheath was strapped a long, curved dagger. The hilt itself was more worn.

Behind her, a few paces back, strode the bard.

She was still unaccustomed to his presence. Always a few steps behind. Always well groomed, well dressed. Never tired. He spoke little, not quite what she'd expected of a bard, but at least he did his fair share of work when they paused to camp at night. He would gather wood, fetch water, start the fire, and even cook if she made it clear that she was busy. Still, she could not call him a comfortable travelling companion. Nor did he ever sing, though he claimed to be an accomplished songsmith.

She was still unaccustomed to his presence. Always a few steps behind. Always well groomed, well dressed. Never tired. He spoke little, not quite what she'd expected of a bard...

And, always, he watched her.

The town was larger than her home village. It was circled by a low wall, its sturdy iron gate closed against night entrants.

She sighed wearily and prepared to rattle the bars for a while, but suddenly a shadow moved beyond the gate.

"Travellers. You come late to our town. If you would enter, state your names and business."

"I'm Jastine of Calvin's Well, a village to the west of here."

The guard nodded to her. "I know of it."

She shifted the strap slightly on her sore shoulder and struggled to clear road dust from her dry throat. "As to my business...well...I'd like to stay the night at an inn if there's room. Maybe more than one night. It depends. Has Yandros the cloth merchant passed through town yet?"

The figure beyond the gate hawked and spat into the weeds beside the road. "Yes, worse luck. Three days back. My daughter ordered enough fabric to beggar me. You've business with him?" He glanced at her, sharp eyes assessing her dirty, tattered clothing, her worn pack.

"I've business, yes." Jassi fought the urge to collapse right there against the wall. She'd missed him again. She'd been sure that he'd slow a bit, to rest if nothing else. The gods knew that she needed rest, and she'd only been on the road for a double handful of days. Yandros had been travelling for much longer, stopping at each village and town on his way back to the capital with his cloth orders. Then again, he had a horse and cart. Jassi had lost her horse three days back, to a broken leg.

The guard held his lamp a bit higher, looking at her, curiosity plain in his face. Finally he

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Featured Artist
Anders Finer

Website: http://www.andersfiner.com/

Artist unavailable for an interview

Unless a Seed Dies

By David Eland

I was seven years old when I met Grandfather for the first time. I wore my new white coveralls and desperately hoped that he would like me. He wore a dark grey suit with a blood red sash. The warmth of his hand shocked me so much; I forgot the greeting I had practiced with Teacher for weeks. I stared open-mouthed at his hand until he let go. Then I threw my arms around his waist and buried my face in his stiff shirt. I shouldn't have cried, but I couldn't help myself. I had never met another human before.

I clung to him, my ear pressed against his chest, hearing for the first time a heartbeat other than my own. I felt as though I had been holding my breath my entire life, only then taking my first lungful of air. I was afraid it was only a dream and that he would disappear like the mountain mists. All too soon, he took hold of my wrists and freed himself from my grasp.

"Zack, please come and sit down," he said.

We sat alone at a linen-covered table on the east veranda that thrust out over the steep mountain slope. Grandfather took a sip from a steaming black mug, and light from the rising sun glinted on his gold senator's ring. His deep-set, steel-blue eyes peered into mine, as though examining me for some inner flaw, looking to see if I measured up to his requirements. I wiped my tears on my sleeve and tried to sit up taller in my chair.

"I'm eighteen hundred and forty-four years old. Sixty-two of those years in this body," he said. Then he looked away, as though he had heard someone call his name.

He asked me questions about my education and my physical training. I answered eagerly, saying that I liked swimming and judo best.

Grandfather looked much older in person than in the holos I had seen. His face was long and narrow with high cheekbones. His black hair was oiled and combed straight back from his high forehead.

"Grandfather, how old are you?" I asked.

He frowned at me.

"I'm eighteen hundred and forty-four years old. Sixty-two of those years in this body," he said. Then he looked away, as though he had heard someone call his name.

I shivered in the high mountain air. Grandfather's estate sat above the Yungas, the cloud forest on the eastern flank of the Andes. Below us, the rising sun had turned the valley's canopy of clouds into a luminous white blanket. Some of the mammoth cedars lifted their heads through the white, a silent forest rooted in the clouds. Teacher said some of the trees were almost two thousand years old but most of those were hollowed out by heartrot.

"Grandfather, when must *I* die?" I blurted out the question and immediately wished I could call back the words.

There was a long silence. Grandfather furrowed his brow in irritation, still looking down at the clouds. Then he turned to look at me, and his face softened.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I almost forgot that you have no awareness of the mind-net. I am speaking with someone; wait a moment." He paused for a long beat, probably closing the link to

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Twist and Turn: Advice on Dastardly Plots

By Mike Loos

Don't you just love plot twists and surprise endings? Personally, I'm a big fan. There's nothing better than cruising through a great story, blithely nearing a conclusion that you've predicted since the midpoint, a good ending, one that wraps everything up really nicely, when "Bam!" You get there and just can't believe it. "Deckard is actually a replicant?!" (from *Blade Runner*). Or, "Bruce Willis has been dead the whole time?!!" (from *The Sixth Sense*). You can almost hear the author cackling in the background, "I gotcha!!" And they did. The author reeled you in like a big ol' trout. And you didn't realize it until the very last moment. What a dastardly thing to do to a perfectly innocent reader.

That's the beauty of a great twist ending. And yes, the examples above are actually from movies, but there are many great literary cases as well. How about "The Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry or *Shutter Island* by Dennis Lehane? I'm a big fan of Philip K. Dick, who is the master of the twist. And one of my favorite stories, "Scherzo With Tyrannosaur", by Michael Swanwick, has a great twist ending. It's similar to a classic story by Robert Heinlein, called "All You Zombies," which might just be the ultimate time-travel story. All of these are great examples of authors or stories that revel in the mastery of the perfectly-executed plot twist.

If you're a writer, you know something that's even better than reading a great twist ending: It's creating one. But you also know that it's not an easy thing to pull off. Many a reasonable story has been ruined by a ham-handed writer who thought their story wasn't "special" enough or the ending wasn't memorable enough to proceed under its own power. So they went for the big twist, the blockbuster ending, which, of course, proceeded to land with a big *Thud!* Don't let this happen to your next big story. Instead, I would like to offer a few suggestions that might help you master the art of the twist and leave your readers both praising and cursing your name. You'll earn the praise for your excellent command of craft; you'll deserve the curses for getting the reader when they least expect it (cue the big horror movie laugh).

The Whole Story

Lesson Number One: A great twist cannot save a bad story. The technique is not a Hail Mary pass that you can use late at night when you've written as much as you can think of, but you still need to wrap up all the loose ends for the plot to resolve nicely. That's not a twist ending, it's a cop-out ending. And your readers will feel cheated.

One of the best things about the ending in M. Night Shyamalan's movie *The Sixth Sense* is that the story was very good, even *before* the twist. Shyamalan treated his audience to an interesting plot and real characters. He could have ended that story any number of ways; the one he chose simply turned a good movie into a great one. You should be able to draw the same conclusion about twists that you throw at your readers.

That's not to say that a twist ending should be perceived as optional. Clearly, it may be the best (perhaps only) way to bring the narrative to the proper conclusion. But you cannot ignore

all the other important aspects of story creation: realistic characters, exciting plot, gripping suspense, great dialogue, effective descriptions. In other words, don't throw together a bad story just because you want to convince your readers how clever you are with a tricky ending. That never works. In fact, it normally backfires because those same readers will never get to the clever ending. Most will just quit in the middle.

Angles of Attack

In some cases, a plot twist only works because of the *perspective* of the audience. A famous example of this comes in the final moments of *The Empire Strikes Back* when Luke Skywalker learns that Darth Vader is his father. Just think how anti-climatic that scene would have been if George Lucas had released Episodes I through VI in order. After first learning the whole back story of Anakin Skywalker, the knowledge of Luke's paternity would not be much of a revelation. From the perspective of an isolated Episode V, though, the shock factor was very effective. In fact, that scene now ranks as one of the Top 100 movie endings of all time, and cements *The Empire Strikes Back* as the best of all the Star Wars movies.

Obviously, Lucas benefited from that fact that he created a whole story up front—so that not only could he "spring the trap" in Episode V, but also follow it up in Episode VI with another big revelation (that Luke and Leia were really twins). The true genius, though, was in *how* Lucas did it, by telling the story in the order that he did. That lesson is the one to remember. Think of one of your own stories and ask yourself: What if I changed the point-of-view or told the story starting from a different point in time? Perhaps you'll find interesting drama in places where it didn't exist before.

The Reader Should Have Seen it Coming

To really work, a twist ending to a story has to be plausible and ultimately believable. This might sound strange for someone writing an actual fantasy story, but fantasy (otherwise known as an unrealistic or improbable supposition) is probably the last thing you want in an ending. Here's why: If your readers don't buy the logic, they won't be convinced by the resolution. If they're not convinced by the resolution, they'll feel cheated and ultimately forget about everything else they enjoyed. The ideal case is when the reader leans back at the end and alternately kicks himself for not realizing the truth sooner—because of all the clues that now make sense—and also basks in the afterglow of a wonderfully clever outcome. That's when you know that you've really accomplished something.

Consistency

The first challenge is *consistency*. In other words, you have to make sure that everything adds up, no detail contradicts any other, and no conclusion seems too far-fetched. The way to do that, in many cases, is to actually do a little "backwards writing." Here's how: Once you know what the twist is going to be (and when you intend to spring it), you can work back from that point, adjusting particular aspects of the narrative as needed to be more consistent. Certain descriptions might have to be tweaked, timelines adjusted and even character behavior altered to make sure that the reader won't catch you in a mistake that confuses the outcome.

At the same time, you might find that you need to go back and drop a few little clues along

the way, just to ensure that the reader *could* have figured out the ending (even though secretly you really don't want them to). But you have to be careful. Clues can't be "bolted on." They have to be well-integrated into the existing plot. More importantly, you shouldn't try to disguise the clues. That's normally a dead giveaway to the reader that you have some "funny business" going on. If for some reason you feel the need to obscure the clues, you have to "hide them in plain sight", as the saying goes. And no fair throwing in clues that are designed specifically to confuse the reader or misrepresent what is really going on. That's called *lying*. Readers will never forgive you for that.

Probability

After consistency, your next important challenge is *probability*. That is, the reader has to believe that the ending is not only possible, but that it's at least somewhat likely. In other words, they may not have been able to predict what was going to happen while they were in the middle of the story, but once finished, they should agree that the result was inevitable. If not, they should at least walk away without the feeling that another outcome was much more obvious. If they don't, you've lost.

Although a great plot twist seems to upend a story, the truth of the matter is that it really doesn't. In fact, the best plot twists are ones that don't unravel the sense of the story at all. Rather, they provide a completely new perspective from which to appreciate it. Try this as an exercise: Take a story that you've already finished, one that's already *exactly* the way you want it, and try to imagine alternate endings for it. Brainstorm every possible outcome that would be plausible with the characters, milieu and facts that you've already established. Think hard. Try to come up with every possibility. From that list, then pick one that you think works the best. It might even be the one you came up with originally, which is fine. Or you might be surprised with where the thought process takes you. I'm personally convinced that some of the best twist endings are ones that were actually changed at the last minute by the author. They had the ending all wrapped up, then had a brainstorm at the last minute. You might have the same thing happen to your story.

You might also take a page from the O. Henry playbook. What often makes his stories so great is that he makes readers sympathize with the protagonist's goal so much that in their minds, they eliminate all other possible outcomes. The clues are all there, but both the reader and the characters just believe that everything will work out fine. When the perfectly logical outcome arrives, the reader is surprised because he or she was so convinced that they knew what was going to happen that they missed the more likely explanation. When the "real" truth comes out, the reader is surprised, but not in an unpleasant way. Their unconscious mind probably knew the truth the whole time. Their conscious emotions just obscured it.

All Twists Are Not Created Equal

While twist endings are a lot of fun, in a lot of cases, they just won't work for your story. And if so, you'll only ruin it by trying too hard to make it happen. So don't. But that doesn't mean that the technique isn't useful for you. You might just have to think on a slightly smaller scale. What about a twist ending to an individual scene? Or an unexpected revelation in the middle of a story that takes the narrative in a completely new direction?

Remember the scene in "Raiders of the Lost Ark" where Indiana Jones races through the

Cairo market searching for Marion, only to come face to face with the huge guy spinning his fancy swords? The excitement of the moment leads the audience to think any number of possible outcomes, but I'll bet almost no one predicted the twist, when Indy just takes out his gun and shoots the guy. It's a perfectly logical solution, but one that is utterly unexpected. That's the type of twist you want.

Another special class of plot twist exists in an old science fiction staple called the time-paradox. Both Stanwick's "Scherzo With Tyrannosaur" and Heinlein's "All You Zombies" fall into this category. The device involves a plotline where some, if not all, of the characters are able to travel through time, a factor which can (and normally does) affect the events in the story in unexpected ways. Imagine a man in the future, who sends his son back in time to father a child who ends up growing up to be his father (kind of like 'The Terminator' story). That's a time paradox. I encourage anyone to read both of the stories I've mentioned to completely understand the nuances and keep the technique in mind as another way to create interesting plot twists.

Twist and Turn

In the end, I always try to remember the following: A great plot is a great plot for the same reasons, with or without plot twists. It involves believable events (even in fantasy), it develops in an inevitable way, and it resolves itself as a natural consequence of the interactions of the characters. It's that simple. Now, if it were only that easy.

As The Plot Turns. Good luck with your next diabolical ending!

Linda Tso

Linda Tso stumbled into the world of digital art in 2003 and has been working in this medium ever since. She likes to create pretty-girl characters and landscapes/natural environments, often combining the two with attempted realism. Her works can be seen on her website and various online art galleries. She is currently doing book covers and illustrations for a publisher in Taiwan. She lives in New Zealand.

Website: http://www.stickydoodle.com/

Princess and Empress © Hotu Publishing

The Book of the Strongest

By Jonathan Moeller

During the ninth year of the reign of Cyrusius the Great King, Lord of Sarth and ruler of all the lands of civilized men from the east to the west, it pleased the Great King to divide his dominions into one hundred and forty-four satrapies. Over each satrapy the Great King appointed a man of talent and ability and gave the responsibility of that satrapy into his hands.

Now on the far side of the Sarbian Desert, on the eastern coast of the Inner Sea, lay a small land called Amariel. It pleased the Great King to appoint Darian, son of Darosius, to oversee the satrapy of Amariel.

"Go, my beloved servant and kinsman," said the Great King, "and take up the rulership of Amariel, for it is a rugged land, and its people are willful. Take therefore this ring and staff of office, and you shall speak with my voice in all affairs of Amariel, save for when I myself command you."

And though it grieved Darian to leave the splendors of Sarthepolis, and all his kin, he nonetheless loved his lord, the king, and took all his household and goods to Amariel. With him went his wife, Ishara, a woman of surpassing beauty and wisdom. Darian traveled to Shalifane, the chief city of Amariel, and there set up his government. He ruled wisely, stern with those who broke the Great King's law, yet kind and generous to the poor, the widow, and the orphan.

And though it grieved Darian to leave the splendors of Sarthepolis, and all his kin, he nonetheless loved his lord, the king, and took all his household and goods to Amariel.

In this his wife aided him in no small part, for she possessed great grace, and could shrewdly judge the hearts of men. The people of Amariel held her in great honor, for she convinced her husband to build great irrigation works and open the public granaries to the widow and the orphan.

In the eleventh year of Cyrusius's reign, a man called Mardak traveled to the Citadel of Shalifane. Mardak came from the ancient city of Tarlith and had an evil reputation, for he was a magician in the manner of the Tarlithites, and spoke with the dead and worked charms and spells to beguile the minds of men.

Darian went out to Mardak and said: "Why do you come to these lands? For though you are the Great King's subject and under protection of the Great King's laws, your reputation is an evil one, and dark rumors ever surround you. What is your business? For I shall tolerate no mischief in these lands that the Great King has given into my holding."

Mardak sneered in answer. "Take heed, oh satrap, for even the mightiest of men should speak with courtesy, lest they perish. But fear not, for I have not come to trouble the peace of this wretched backwater. I have come to avenge myself against my enemy Erashur, a magician also, for he has wronged me."

"If he has wronged you, then there are courts," said Darian. "The barbarians of savage lands may indulge in blood feuds, but civilized men do not. And heed your own words, oh magician. The mightiest men may indeed perish from discourtesy."

Mardak sneered again and perhaps would have said more, but then his eyes fell upon

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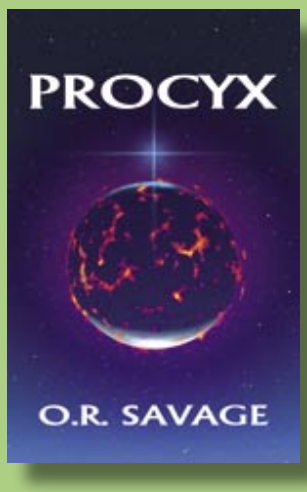

Procyx appeared at the edge of the Galaxy, just as ancient Mhyrnian texts had predicted. To scientists it was a fascinating anomaly, for it seemed to be a star that shone in only one color–a single frequency of pure, blue light. But then nearby worlds began to crumble, spinning into fiery deaths while their suns exploded or smothered out in a dreadful finality called Hypermotility. Humanity's only hope lay in the Vanguards, mythical vessels of irresistible power. Yet it seemed these wondrous ships of light were only myths. Meanwhile, centuries passed. More and more star systems died and nothing could be done to stop the spread of Procyx's cancerous ruin . . . unless the Mhyrnians had an answer for this too . . .

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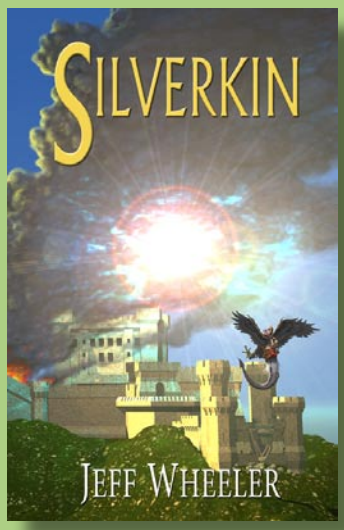

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AMBERLIN BOOKS

Alternate History: Changing the Story After the Fact

By Douglas Niles

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.
-- old English nursery rhyme

To me, the most fascinating questions can all be prefaced with the words "What if. . . ?" These queries lie at the root of virtually all speculative storytelling. The tales that answer these questions are alternate history, sometime called counterfactual, stories. Alternate history is a small but growing genre of fiction, A good alternate history will provide the readers with a detailed sense of the setting, as in good historical fiction, but should also explore some of the features of that setting by diverging from the events that actually happened. What might have happened to alter the actual event? What are the likely effects and ramifications of that alteration? What things would still be the same?

This kind of question can be of very broad scope, and allows for an infinite array of answers. But I'd like to write about alternate history that is a little more precisely focused than that. In the pages of his classic time travel novel *The End of Eternity*, Isaac Asimov outlined a philosophy to which, in my own alternate history, I try to remain faithful. Asimov's characters travel through time attempting to make adjustments to the course of history. While doing so, they adhere to the principle of "minimum necessary change". That is, history should be altered no more than is absolutely required to achieve the desired effect.

The poem at the start of this article is a time-honored example of how a small, apparently insignificant occurrence can have effects extending far beyond its immediate impact. A common metaphor for this concept is to think of a pebble dropped into a pond of still water. The pebble is tiny, but the ripples created by its impact can travel very far indeed.

Such questions as "What if Julius Caesar had been able to use steamships?" or "What if Robert E. Lee had an armored division at Gettysburg?" certainly provide the grist for exciting and imaginative storytelling. The effects of these alterations are undeniable and far-reaching. In fact, it might be said that those effects are so significant that they will, for all intents and purposes, render the historical period unrecognizable. To extend the pebble in the pond metaphor, it is as if the pond itself has been obliterated by a massive boulder dropped from the sky.

How much more fascinating (to me, at least) if the pivotal point of the story is a small, and very plausible, divergence? What if the outcome of Gettysburg is altered because on the first day of the battle one officer displays the initiative to seize a key position an hour earlier than

historically? Or what if his counterpart should suffer a fall from a horse and fail to act in time? How does the battle change? Do the second and third days still occur? If Lee wins, what are the ramifications of his victory? Can the South win the war—and, if so, what happens then?

Perhaps because of my interest and background in wargame design, the area of military alternate history is of special interest to me. In the course of my own writing (with my coauthor and partner, Michael Dobson) we have had the chance to create two such "points of departure." (Though we have written three books, the second—*Fox at the Front*—is a sequel to *Fox on the Rhine*, and the story grows out of the same point of departure.)

The "Fox" books commence with the July 20, 1944 Bomb Plot, the assassination attempt against Hitler. By the simple expedient of leaving a briefcase in place (historically, it was moved so that a junior officer could press a little closer to a conference table) we have a story that begins with the death of Hitler, and progresses through a series of expanding ripples. This doesn't result in German victory in WW2, but it does allow for accelerated German jet fighter production and the survival of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, among other things. These effects gave us the framework of what we hope is an exciting and plausible war novel.

Our current work in progress (*MacArthur's Downfall: The Invasion of Japan*) uses a simple catapult repair at the Battle of Midway as a point of departure. The immediate effect is a Japanese victory in what was historically an epic triumph for the US Navy. The long-term effect is a little more surprising, since in our story the outgrowth of a tactical Japanese victory actually hastens the overall defeat of the Empire of Japan.

Do these points of departure allow for interesting storytelling? Can you learn a little bit of history, while reading a story that takes events in a new and surprising direction? It is my sincere hope that you, the readers, will answer "yes."

Interview
Douglas Niles

Professional and Educational Information: I have a teaching degree and taught English, Speech, and Drama for five years, until I took a job as a game designer for TSR Inc. I worked there from 1982 to 1990 and since '90 have been a freelance writer.
First time you tried to get something published: I was a staff designer at TSR, and my products were published as part of my job, starting with D&D adventures in 1982. Authors Most Inspired By: J.R.R. Tolkien, Lloyd Alexander, Alistair MacClean; Edgar Rice Burroughs.
Schools Attended: University of Wisconsin—Oshkosh.
Degrees: BA 1977
Published works: Over 60 titles, including 30+ novels.
Website URL: Alliterates.com

Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published?
A: When TSR began publishing novels in the mid-1980s, I submitted a fantasy novel I had written. It was rejected at first, but when the company acquired the license rights to Ed Greenwood's "Forgotten Realms" world, I modified the story to fit the setting and it became DARKWALKER ON MOONSHAE.

Q: How has the Internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?
A: It makes contact with readers more personal, and with publishers, more convenient. (For a long time I was published by a company that was a thirty minute drive from my house. My house hasn't moved from Wisconsin, but my publishers are now in Seattle and NYC. So the 'net makes it much easier to keep in touch.)

Q: What has been your inspiration for the settings?
A: I think my most inspired setting was the fantasy world of the Watershed, which was inspired by a visit to Switzerland. Switzerland is the watershed of Europe, with 3 great rivers (Rhine, Rhone and Danube), emerging from the mountains and flowing to three great seas (North, Mediterranean and Black). When one of my Swiss hosts pointed out this watershed, I had the closest thing to an epiphany I've ever experienced—and "A World of Three Waters" was born.

Q: Do you have any favorite characters?
A: The protagonist of my most recent book (WAR OF THE WORLDS: NEW MILLENNIUM) is a dysfunctional and emotionally aloof writer who lives in the woods of Wisconsin. (Not at ALL like me, of course!) But his flaws, reflected against the backdrop of a Martian invasion of Earth, made him compelling to me in a way that none of my other characters has ever done.

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Q: What influences have helped you become the writers you are?
A: My love of reading (instilled by my parents) and my enthusiasm for adventure influence my writing a lot. (As a younger man, I skied, backpacked, mountain climbed, even parachuted out of a perfectly good airplane. Now, I sometimes walk all the way out to the mailbox to get the mail. . .)

Q: What have you both been reading lately?
A: I love John Sandford's "Prey" novels and just finished one last night. I like W.E.B Griffin and have been reading his "Corps" series. Oh, I can't forget Colleen McCullough's whole "Rome" series.

Q: How much of your time do devote to writing?
A: I generally spend all morning at my desk, though sometimes the Internet distracts me in not entirely productive ways. Some days I work all afternoon and into the evening, and others I'm done after lunch.

Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
A: Often a conversation with another writer can help. Sometimes setting the work aside and turning to a different project helps. I usually have about 3 going, ranging from outline to final draft stages; plus I do about 10 hours a week writing writing textbooks for a local publisher. (Not a typo; the kind of textbooks I write are textbooks about writing!)

Continued from Issue 38

Shadowloom

By Mark Reeder

Chapter Thirteen

The air smells sweet when one survives death's hellish hand, and Enion's air is the sweetest in all the worlds that border the Umbra.

So I thought when I awakened. Someone had built a small fire against the morning chill. I lay beside it, my head resting on a saddle. They had also removed my shirt and bandaged my ribs.

Voices close by. I turned my head and saw Peer standing a little way off, facing the valley. He was speaking to Della, his hulking frame towering over her. My Queen's clothes were splotched with blood; a crimson gash flamed on one cheek. I took a deep breath to ask how the battle went but could only muster a weak *ahhhh*.

I turned my head and saw Peer standing a little way off, facing the valley. He was speaking to Della, his hulking frame towering over her. My Queen's clothes were splotched with blood; a crimson gash flamed on one cheek.

Peer whispered, "He's going to be all right."

"That thing almost killed him," she replied, her voice wavering slightly.

"While he fought it, our army was able to rally. Without him, I doubt we would have survived."

She bit her lip.

"I never thought Qweg would risk himself that way."

"He has surprised me too. It's as though he's a different person than before."

"Do you suppose that being different, he has somehow changed and would now. . . " She paused as Parsifal limped up to them, his left arm in a sling.

The Captain spoke in low tones I could not hear and stepped away. Della picked up her black medical bag.

She said to Peer, "Are you sure Qweg will be all right?"

"Yes, M'lady. Go. Others need your skills this day."

"Watch over him." She left with Parsifal.

Peer nodded and turned toward me.

I pretended to sleep, which wasn't all that difficult. Before darkness settled over my mind again, my thoughts meandered over the idea that they suspected I was a different person than before. Given the tone in their voices, they liked the change, maybe even admired it. That made me think this new Qweg was better than the old. I fell asleep wondering what a permanent change might mean.

I woke again at midday, feeling well enough to travel. The rest of our army, what remained, prepared to march back to Enion.

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

By J.K Rowling

When I returned home last weekend, I discovered a copy of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* sitting on my desk. Apparently it had been released while I was away, and sold a rather large number of copies, one or two of which arrived at my house under mysterious circumstances. Lacking anything better to do, I sat down and read it that evening.

The story of *The Half-Blood Prince* centers around a fellow named Harry, who has also received the lion's share of page time in Rowling's first five books. As I recall, this Harry guy spent most of the last book yelling at the three or four people who liked him, joined a cult and generally had a miserable time. Thus, to my surprise and joy, he spent a large portion of this novel yelling at people who *don't* like him.

In addition to the yelling, there was also the kissing. Yes, lots of the kissing. Almost everyone in this book kisses someone else, and most of the protagonists spend (by my calculations) approximately 13% of their time kissing. This phenomenon is brought to an abrupt and tragic end at the hands of...well, I really shouldn't give it away. Let's just say that a certain evil group takes umbrage at this unchecked display of teenage hormones and decides to put a stop to it.

Amidst the daily excitement of Hogwarts (an unsanitary name for a school, I must say), Rowling provides a glimpse into the events preceding the *Harry Potter* series, the motivations of some of its key characters, and hints at what the increasingly grim future may hold. Though *The Half-Blood Prince*'s girth is formidable, its simpler, faster-paced plotline and relatively small size (compared to *Order of the Phoenix*) are a welcome return to the style of the series' first few installments. Still, several forests have been reported missing since the release of *Half-Blood Prince*, and several more have gone into hiding. Nothing compared to the Great Tree Riots of 2003, but I digress.

In addition to the usual classroom discussions and hallway altercations, Quidditch matches and kissing, we see that the protagonists are beginning to grow up…a little. As is usually the case with children, discord and resultant vengefulness remain roughly static, but the methods used to deal with these emotional issues grow in both severity and cruelty, a shift that—in the case of the *Harry Potter* series—mirrors the events of the world outside Hogwarts' allegedly safe walls.

All in all, I found *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* to be an enjoyable and worthy addition to the series. It succeeds both in propelling the overall plotline forward and bringing new depth to many of the characters within—good and evil alike. Best of all, however, I hear there's a seventh book in the works.

Possible Objectionable Material: Violence involving children; blood, kissin', mild fantasizing and general tomfoolery.

(Reviewed by Steven Richards)

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

By J.K. Rowling

There are a number of milestones in fantasy publishing that fans who have been involved in the field can look back on. For the more "mature" there is the original publication of *The Lord of the Rings*. For many of more middle-age, there's the publication of Terry Brooks' *Sword of Shannara*. For many, there's the first time one saw *Star Wars* (and for those who are older, that was all it was, no subtitle announcing it was the fourth episode, thankyouverymuch). For the latest generation of fantasy fans, the milestone has to be the release of a new Harry Potter book. And these *are* major milestones, if for no other reason than the marketing juggernaut that accompanies each one.

But the Harry Potter series would not be the success it is, even with the most ingenious marketing plan, were it not for the fact that these are enjoyable books. Yes, it's easy for the cynical and the very high-brow to look down their noses at the Harry Potter phenomenon, make a 'tsking' noise, and dismiss the books as fluff and good promotion, but to do so would be to ignore what makes so many fans, both children and adults, excitedly await the next volume in the series. And the reason is this: these are incredibly fun books that are telling an incredibly fun story.

But "fun" is more than just simple humor and straightforward action. As the series has gotten more complex, mature, and sophisticated, the fan base has increased, not decreased. No, the fun is that Rowling has an innate skill of drawing the reader into her story and making you care about her characters and her world, inconsistencies and all.

And so we are up to the sixth installment of this seven-part series, the penultimate episode, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. The fifth book ended with Harry and friends having fought a great and costly battle against the forces of the evil wizard, Lord Voldemort. Although they won the battle, not much was gained for Harry and his friends other than keeping the evil forces at bay. When the sixth book opens, Harry now knows a bit more about his past and why Voldemort is trying to kill him, but He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is still terrorizing the wizard world and maneuvering to conquer it all. His actions and the actions of his followers, the Death Eaters, are affecting even the non-magical Muggle world. There is great tension in the wizarding world as everyone is now living their lives in mortal danger, people are mysteriously disappearing, strange disasters are happening, and life in general is lived under a cloud of fear and apprehension.

But life must go on, and so Harry and friends return for their next-to-last year at Hogwarts. What is to happen, though, that hasn't happened already? The enemy has been identified for the most part (a tension that made the early books exciting) and the wizarding world is just waiting for Voldemort to make his final move.

This book, instead of the usual plot of Harry, Ron, and Hermione attempting to unravel a mystery that ultimately ties in to Voldemort, instead focuses more on the relationships of the major characters. Harry, et al., are now in their sixth year and are thus, as sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, beginning to discover more intensely the joys and agonies of love and relationships.

The book falters, however, in that there is too much focus on relationships and not enough on the overarching storyline or even an internal storyline. The overarching story does move forward a bit in this book: Harry takes private lessons from Dumbledore where he learns about Voldemort's past, and the Death Eaters are obviously maneuvering to cripple the Order of the Phoenix, but that's about it. The book is 650 pages long, but there simply isn't enough story and narrative tension to sustain a book of that length. Yes, it's a page-turner, but it's a page-turner because it is the sixth book of what looks to be one of the most exciting fantasy series of recent memory. Were it to stand on its own, I doubt many readers would move on to be fans. The first hundred or so pages wrap up the events of the fifth book, then there's about 400 pages detailing the school year, and then in the final 100 or so pages the action really kicks in and dramatic and drastic events happen to set the series up for the final installment (which can't come too soon). However, the book could have been tightened up quite a bit in the middle 400 pages.

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But the ending ultimately redeems the shortcomings of the beginning and middle. As the media hype has revealed, a major character does die and Harry Potter's world is changed forever as the lines of alliances appear more distinctly drawn. The sides have been taken and the wizarding world is all set for a major battle wherein, as the prophecy from the fifth book revealed, only Harry or Voldemort will survive.

So how does *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* stack up? As part of a much longer story, it is the lull before the storm, the quiet before the chaos. It moves the narrative to just the right point for the final confrontation. But as an individual story, it fails from bad pacing. But since it is meant as part of that larger story, all can be forgiven… if we get the final installment soon!

Possible Objectionable Material: nothing worse than the previous books. The moral ambiguity is still present, but it is beginning to be made more clear. The violence is a bit more intense, but still not excessive. And the sexuality is heightened only to the level of classic teenage love.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince
By J.K. Rowling

From the moment Draco Malfoy crushes Harry's nose on the train to Hogwarts and leaves him immobile, concealed, and bleeding, with the chance of not being discovered for a long time, the novel brings the Harry Potter saga to a serious, "playing for keeps" level. Ultimately, it never disappoints.

J.K Rowling has intimated that this was one of the books she felt the best about in the whole series. I tend to agree. Although portions of the book languish over the teenage romances that pop up like pimples on the plot line, the story as a whole has a richly satisfying sense of purpose. In previous books, Harry seems to have been kept in the dark by the adults, which leaves him to his own devices in discovering the truth and facing it. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, the truth is handed to Harry, and the reader, in tidy, bite size chunks as the story progresses.

Harry's relationship with his friends and Professor Dumbledore have never been so strong, which rings true because Harry very nearly reaches the age of adulthood by the end of this book. Perhaps one of the greatest successes Ms. Rowling has achieved in this story is to age her characters realistically as they progress through school. Consequently the depth of their relationships also matures. Notwithstanding all of the "snogging" scenes, which became a little tedious by the time they were set aside for the central plot line to take center stage, those relationships added humanity, context, and reality to the characters and their relationships.

Although it may be unfair, I think what kept this book from reaching a five-out-of-five rating for me was the climax, which really was quite good. However, I did find the climax, predictably, less than completely satisfying. For good reason, too. This is the second-to-last book in a seven-book series. This book leaves the reader on the eve of the concluding novel and must do more to set up the last book than leave the reader with a sense of conclusion. Yet, even understanding that, this reader felt the heavy cost paid at the end of the book had not been adequately compensated for by the protagonists. More questions were left unanswered than were answered. Ah, but that is the beauty of a second-to-last book in a fairly long series. We now get to wait approximately two years (give or take -- we'd all love to know the release date for the concluding novel) to have those questions answered.

Judging from the sales records this book set, it hardly needs my recommendation, but I give it wholeheartedly, all the same.

(Reviewed by Brendon Taylor)

Short Review: Fantasy
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince
By J.K. Rowling

I had hoped that the problems of *Goblet of Fire* and *Order of the Phoenix* would prove due only to the rush

continued on next page

of getting out a book a year; however, in *Half-Blood Prince* Rowling has regained neither the drive, nor the novelty, nor the tight storylines of her earlier books. The loss would be an acceptable trade-off for greater depth, but I still can't get past major flaws. In 4 and 5, Voldemort acted very foolishly for a wizard who had once managed to threaten the world; in 6, the big plot twist seems ill-considered. It undercuts two important themes. Nonetheless, seeing Harry's growing confidence, Dumbledore as sharp as ever, and gaining further insight into Voldemort's past and character are delights.

(Reviewed by Ida Clinkscales)

Book Review: Fantasy
Mistress of Dragons
By Margaret Weis

Mistress of Dragons initiates a new adult fantasy trilogy in grand style. Melisande, the High Priestess of the secluded pagan empire Seth, effectively engages the reader's sympathy. King Edward IV of Idlyswylde, her counterpart in a monotheistic society beyond Seth, makes a worthy protagonist. Like Merlin, representing magic and mystery, Draconis the Walker brings them together for the good of both dragons and mankind. Although guided by the chief (and ancient) dragoness Anora and her council, Draconis is a hybrid with a mind and heart of his own. His doomed dragon companion, bold young Braun, initiates the action, only to become a sacrificial victim.

Conflict is provided in spades by a cast of villainous dragons, led by the ambitious dragoness, Maristara, the true power in Seth, and her evil hybrid ally, Grald. Their rebellion is a major theme. Edward's lordly father-in-law (and Weinmauer's king) expects Edward to leave himself vulnerable to invasion by joining Draconis' quest. His queen, Ermintrude, the most honorable character, believes in her husband's mission to Seth and in her own strength.

Both groups of dragons have evolved from viewing humans merely as food to seeing their potential for abetting the dragons' individual causes, whether for good or ill. Noted for their wisdom and longevity in folk literature, Weis's dragons are ambitious masters of disguise, manipulation, and cold calculation in using human tools. Bright, vivid descriptions of the dragons enliven the darkest portions of the tale, almost as if justifying their superiority by emphasizing their grandeur. Combat scenes are well wrought.

At times, there seems an overabundance of violence and mayhem, not all of it on the physical plane. Those moments involving children are charming and natural, as are the far more frequent love scenes. Some more intimate scenes will provide a dilemma for sensitive adults, and are definitely not for the faint of heart. Although the style of language is simple, bordering on "easy reader," young adults might be put off or simply bored.

While Edward is courtly and restrained, Grald exceeds the bonds of propriety. He also fights dirty. The warrior priestess, Bellona, Melisande's lover, is one of the surprising coups in the author's area of graceful depictions. Weis rises to a writing occasion that would have tripped up most authors, and leaves the reader wanting to see more of brave Bellona.

Possible Objectionable Material: Contains sex scenes, including a rape.

(Reviewed by A.M. Stickel)

Book Review: Classic Fantasy
The Savage Tales of Solomon Kane
By Robert E. Howard

Robert E. Howard was a great pulp writer in the 1930s, and he is best known for his stories of Conan the Cimmerian. His writing is characterized by lush description, swift pacing, intense action, and sorcerous

continued on next page

horror. But before he wrote Conan, he created other characters, among whom is Solomon Kane. In this book, all the stories, poems, and story fragments about Kane are collected into one volume, lushly illustrated on nearly every page by Gary Gianni.

Solomon Kane is a fierce English swordsman in the 16th century, wandering the world in search of evil to be destroyed, mystery, and adventure. He dresses in Puritanical garb—plain, brown clothing—and considers himself God's instrument to root out the blackest evils in the world by the strength of his sword, pistols, and mighty thews. He's a loner by nature and cannot remain in one place for long without growing restless for open country and adventure.

The collection (recently published by Del Rey) contains nine complete stories, four fragments in various stages of completion, and three complete poems (plus an alternate version of one), along with a couple biographies of Howard, one of them written by H. P. Lovecraft. The complete stories make up the bulk of the book's worth—none of the fragments really gets off the ground, and the longest of them seems to have been abandoned simply because it doesn't go anywhere. I'm not much into poetry, but the three here struck me as being very vivid and intense in their imagery—much like Howard's prose.

Here's a look at a few of the stories:

In "Red Shadows," the first Kane story, published in 1928, Kane finds a girl who has been raped and then stabbed. Before she dies, she tells him the name of her murderer: Le Loup, the Wolf, a black-hearted bandit chieftain ravaging the French countryside. Kane takes it upon himself to hunt down every one of Le Loup's band, but the leader himself escapes through a secret door in his lair. Kane pursues him across the world until the hunt concludes in Africa, amongst a savage tribe of bloodthirsty savages steeped in black sorcery.

This story was so intense it had me shaking at times, and it is indeed a ripping good yarn. Still, it seems as though Howard lost track of his main plot at times in describing completely separate conflicts and brutalities in the savage village where Le Loup has taken refuge.

"The Blue Flame of Vengeance" is the only story in the collection not narrated by Solomon Kane, and it takes place in his homeland of England. Jack Hollinster, an honest young man in a coastal town, bears a grudge against the cruel Sir George Banway for an insult given to his fiancée. After a duel that ends with Sir George being wounded, the knight kidnaps both Jack and Jack's fiancée to his manor, where he is playing host to a crew of bloodthirsty pirates. But Solomon Kane is in the area, hunting after the pirate captain, and he may be able to save Jack from death and his fiancée from concubinage on a pirate vessel.

This was the slowest paced of the stories, but a very brisk read nonetheless. Still, it was less effective than some of the others because there's never much doubt that Solomon Kane will succeed; the dangers put against him just don't seem great enough.

"Wings of the Night" is perhaps the darkest story in the collection. Kane is wandering through the heart of Africa when he comes across a destroyed village and finds a man tied to a stake, still living but mangled by the most horrific wounds Kane has ever seen. He gibbers mindlessly about "wings" before dying in Kane's arms. Solomon Kane goes on to encounter and kill one of a clan of flesh-eating harpies and then finds the inhabitants of a village which they keep enslaved, demanding sacrifices and servitude. The villagers embrace Kane as a savior, and the harpies are angered. After their bloody reprisal, Kane sets out on a plan to destroy them all.

This was one of the best-written stories in the collection, in terms of its imagination and vividness, but the plot falls somewhat flat; the idea of the harpies is gotten across, and the narrative was intense, but in the end it wasn't particularly satisfying. The end left me thinking "So what?"

Overall, it seems as though Howard had a great deal of energy and raw writing talent when composing these stories, but he didn't yet have a mastery of converting that into logical plots and tight narratives. Two of the shorter ones that I didn't discuss in detail ("The Rattle of Bones" and "The Right Hand of Doom") seemed to be primarily expository, getting across a frightening idea with very little action on Kane's part. Others, most notably "The Moon of Skulls", rely heavily on luck and coincidence at critical junctures. Kane also seems like a somewhat shallow character: there's not a whole lot of complexity to him beyond his surface traits. Notable supporting characters are rare, besides N'Longa, a voodoo shaman who aids Kane in "Red Shadows" and later in "The Hills of the Dead."

Also, although Howard says that Kane is a Puritan,

he doesn't seem to behave much like one. He wears the clothes, and he seems to believe in some form of God, but he doesn't seem too concerned with prayer, church attendance, or any other things one might expect of a Christian. Although he quotes the Bible occasionally, many of his attributes seem downright pagan, and he accepts the use of dark sorcery in a way that a faithful Christian (and certainly a Puritan) wouldn't.

Still, the energy is there in great abundance, and many of those flaws didn't really bother me while I was reading the stories. Most of them have enough action, adventure, lush description, and strong narrative to entertain and thrill, even if they have many flaws on closer analysis.

Possible Objectionable Material: Almost every story has a lot of intense, bloody, often brutal violence; there are some references to rape, and some scenes are fairly horrific, including a grotesque scene of necromancy and aerial gorging upon human flesh by harpies. In addition, the illustrations occasionally depict nude women.

(Reviewed by Sean T.M. Stiennon)

Book Review: Fantasy
The Black Company
By Glen Cook

Cook's tale of swords and sorcery follows an ancient mercenary company on the payroll of the recently resurrected and obviously evil Lady. The narrator—the company's physician and historian—renders in terse, matter-of-fact, and frequently wry prose the story of the Black Company as the Lady and her sorcerer henchmen reassert their control of the North. To give away much more of the plot than that the company confronts a series of rebel commanders and that everything leads up to an epic battle against overwhelming odds would be unfair, since the tale is episodic, focused on the present, with little connection between what is happening now and what will happen or what happened before. Few words are wasted explaining the significance of every action.

Cook revels a bit in moral ambiguity—realistically necessary when writing about war and mercenaries, even the fantasy sort. Though the ultimate triumph of good is prophesied sometime before the end of the trilogy, most on the Lady's side are nasty people, and though the Rebel claims to fight for the yet-to-be-resurrected general known as the White Rose, its current leadership is hardly better. Hope lies only in the future.

Despite little larger plot, and besides the continuous and exciting action, the characters keep you reading. You develop favorites and want to know more about them. In fact, a lot of the suspense tying this string of adventures together comes from the reader and the narrator, who has an interest in other people that is lacking in most of the mercenaries, and is trying to figure out the others—from the silent man who joined the company in the North and seems to hold a grudge against one of the Lady's powerful servants, to those servants themselves. Everyone has a mysterious past, as "For most of us, the Black Company is a hiding place, a refuge from yesterday, a place to become a new man."

And ultimately, it is that sense of mystery that makes the work more than the sum of its parts. Picked apart and exposed to the light, one might judge the world generic and undetailed, overarching plot disappointing, theme minimal, and then if we finally did get to know the characters, we'd decide they weren't half as interesting and complicated as we felt before. I would guess that the author made up the background as he went along. And yet, he manages to give tantalizing glimpses—of the world, of the company's long, twisted history—in such a way you sense something really grand and romantic in the gaps. By not telling too much he conjures archetypes—the Jewel Cities, "old and decadent and mad" like ancient cities ought to be, the Windy Country plagued by sandstorms like any respectable desert. Following this path could have easily descended into cliché—and it probably wouldn't work without the narrator's cynicism and the author's tendency to humanize even the villains giving balance. But he gets it right.

Possible objectionable material: Cursing and the horror of war, though not usually graphic.

(Reviewed by Ida Clinkscales)

Book Review: Fantasy

War of the Flowers

By Tad Williams

Tad Williams is one of my favorite writers.

There, I got that out of the way. At least now you'll know where my bias lies. He is, IMHO, one of the few writers out there who are currently pushing the envelope in both sci-fi and fantasy, taking elements from both, mixing them up in his vast imagination, and then laying out entire new worlds for us to explore. He did it in the Otherland series, taking a cyberpunk world and creating from it an offshoot virtual reality where anything was possible.

And in *The War of the Flowers*, he has taken fairy tales and given them a makeover for the 21st century.

The War of the Flowers opens with Theo Vilmos, an aging rock musician, losing his baby, being dumped by his girlfriend and all in all having a really rotten year. His way of dealing with this is to retreat into a diary he receives from an "uncle," a diary that seems to be describing a trip his uncle took into a fairy land unlike any you see in Victorian paintings. Theo becomes enthralled with the book, and ends up almost dying at the hands of a creature from hell sent to kill him. He is saved by the foulmouthed, absolutely adorable (but don't tell her that) fairy Applecore. And that is where the story starts.

The fairy world in *The War of the Flowers* is an urban nightmare. Controlled by a series of fairy families, whose names are taken from flowers (thus the title), the city of fairies where Theo finds himself is a skewed version of our own. Williams admits to being intrigued by the idea of what fairy stories would have been like if they were written in our time. And in *The War of the Flowers*, the rest of us can find out.

I won't divulge too much about the plot; suffice it to say that Williams stays true to this fantasy origins and maintains a quest format for the story. However, as another of my favorite authors Juliet E. McKenna says, what we are all looking for is the same but different. And here, though Williams maintains certain fantasy tropes, he gives us enough difference to keep us reading.

One of the main criticisms I could give this, and which seems to have been repeated in a few other reviews, is that the book is too short! Williams' imagination certainly seems boundless. Here, restricted to the one book format, we get the feeling that there is so much more to learn about this world.

Throughout the novel, Williams maintains the air of menace and mystery surrounding the fairy creatures. These are not the friendly fairies that Disney has created for us. These are taken from much more ancient stock, and it shows. Though the characters are endearing, they are also difficult to grasp and maintain a constant distance. They never cease to surprise Theo, and in turn, us. Just when you think you have them sussed, they do something completely unexpected.

Williams' gift with words is also of prime importance to the appeal of the book. He paints thick word pictures, like a Leonardo da Vinci painting, always leaving a window in the top left corner that we can peer through to find something else. All of his descriptions are rich with detail, leaving your imagination to take you soaring through wondrous lands and strange worlds.

This is a great book. Maybe not up there with Williams' Osten Ard trilogy, but certainly head and shoulders above more classic genre offerings. Williams takes risks, and that is what makes his writing so interesting. He is something any budding writer should aspire to, always seeking to better his skills. But next time, make it longer!

Possible objectionable material: Some implied sexual content, some dark fantasy scenes, some harrowing personal drama in the beginning of the book, some "fantastical" bad language that probably won't offend anyone (unless you speak Fairy), and a scene that coincidentally resembles a recent tragic event in the U.S. but which is dealt with in a very respectful way.

(Reviewed by Joel Brown)

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shrugged. "Well, the gate is closed. Unless you are known to someone in the town, I must ask you to wait till morning to enter. And you still have not named your friend there." He pointed at the bard, who still lingered, in shadow, behind her.

Jassi waited for the bard to speak. No luck. "His name's Rook. He sings."

Rook moved forward into the light, smiling his slightly crooked, mocking smile. He met the guard's eyes, bowing, his instrument case shifting almost imperceptibly on his back. He was very practised at bowing.

The guard smiled, his face lighting far beyond any ability of the lamp. "Rook! It's been almost a year since you passed this way!" He slid a large key into the gate's lock, struggling a bit to turn it. "I've missed your songs. You know, your song about Shantri's Chalice last Winter's Fest almost convinced me to leave the town and turn mercenary." He grinned. "Almost. Not quite. Though with my daughter's spending habits, the gods know I need the gold."

The gate swung wide as the guard strode out to clap Rook on the shoulder. Shaking her head silently, Jassi walked through unnoticed, heading toward a well-lit, two-story building, proudly displaying a tavern's signboard. For the past three days, since the bard had appeared suddenly at the roadside, spooking her horse, and causing its broken leg, he'd been following her. No explanation. No apologies, even when she'd had to kill the horse. Simply a courtly bow, a smile, and a low, murmured, "We seem to be travelling in the same direction, milady." And she, unused to travel etiquette, had allowed him to travel with her. Behind her. Watching.

Of course, she had managed to get him to hand over enough gold to pay her ma back for the dead horse.

Still, here, at the first large town they'd reached together, it would seem that he was well known, a celebrity. Jassi snorted. Well, at least since he was so popular here, he would probably stay for a bit, earn his keep by singing while she went on in search of Yandros.

Jassi spat, unthinkingly mimicking the guard, into the weeds, then pulled the inn's heavy door open.

She was hit by a wall of light, sound, and smell. Loud voices and laughter, the scent of good food, wood smoke, well-kept weapons and unwashed bodies. Jassi breathed deep, feeling more at home than she had for days. This place, while larger, was so similar to her ma's inn at home. A hint of homesickness nibbled at her...but faintly. She'd promised Sasha she'd be able to catch up with the cloth merchant, be able to add her request for white silk, intricate lace, to the orders he'd be fetching back to the village. It was worth it, surely, to get her eldest sister out of the house, safely married to the fop she'd chosen, and no longer mooning about in the room she shared with Jassi.

If only she'd been able to catch him closer to home, but somehow, she seemed always to fall farther behind. At this rate he'd be in Kingstown before she reached him.

But, after all, while inns like this were homey and welcoming, there were always more like them along her path, and she was seeing more of the world on her little trek than most of the folk back home had. Their view of the outside world was mostly secondhand, stories told by adventurers around a good fire on a cool night like this one. In an inn so similar to this one.

As she walked up to the bar, she heard a commotion behind her at the door. Cheering. Rook's voice, calm and sardonic. Something to do with some popular ballad.

Shaking her head slightly, Jassi looked up at the innkeeper. He was looking over her shoulder, smiling widely. His deep voice roared out beside her ear, nearly deafening her.

"Rook, you devil songbird you! Come to seduce my last unmarried daughter? Or do you

have new songs for us?" He squeezed his bulky figure out from behind the bar, heading for the table where Rook was allowing himself, with many a bow, to be seated. "Food first? Or wine? I'll not have it said that I made you play for us starved and parched." He clapped Rook on the back with a beefy hand.

Jassi winced, then snagged a passing server, a girl of about thirteen years. "Sorry." She smiled at the girl, sympathetically...the poor kittling would probably be working late tonight, serving drinks to those who came to hear the bard sing. She remembered nights like that from the time she'd spent as a serving maid at her mother's inn, before she'd escaped to work in the stables...before she'd started grilling passing warriors on fighting techniques. "Before things get too hectic here, could I get some food and ale? Whatever's inexpensive and hot will do. Oh, and a room for the night. I've coin, but not enough to waste on fripperies."

The girl started to nod, then paused, glancing over at Rook, who was watching Jassi, as always. "Are you with him?"

Jassi shook her head. "No. We've been travelling together for the last few days, but only because we were headed in the same direction. I'm sure that he'll be staying here a while, but I'm moving on tomorrow." Maybe, with luck, she could catch up with Yandros at the next town. The merchant surely had to rest sometime.

The serving girl pressed her lips together. "Then you're with him. Your food and lodging are on the house. Rook makes it worth Da's while when he stops through. And Ma likes him. Sort of. If you're one of his, you stay here, eat here, free."

"One of his?" But the girl ignored Jassi's confused question, motioning her to choose one of the few tables still empty, and then pushing her way swiftly through the fast-filling tavern into the kitchen.

One of his. One of his what? Mistresses? Gods forbid! Enough minstrels had passed through her ma's inn to convince Jassi not to fall for their honeyed words and quick-fleeing feet. No, she was her own person, at least as soon as this errand was done. Till then she was Sasha's, sort of. Her messenger, at least. Sasha had been adamant. Jassi was to follow that cloth merchant all the way to the capital if need be. And, even with the mundane quality of the mission, Jassi had to admit it had been interesting so far.

By the time the server had set her food, a bowl of meat and mushrooms stewed in wine and a half loaf of bread, down in front of her, and remembered that Jassi had ordered ale, not wine, Rook had already started to play. Sweet, brittle crystal shards of melody wove their way through the room, silencing speech, and even laughter, wherever they touched. Even Jassi, no great music lover, had to admit that the bard's songs were better able than most to tear at emotions. The words evaded her hearing, perhaps because of the attention she was paying to the truly excellent food. Something about a girl on some quest. A hero. Ah. A quest for the chalice of the gods.

Jassi finished her food, leaning back in her chair. She could afford this one night to rest, to eat and drink, and listen to songs of magic and derring-do. Tomorrow she'd be on the road again, refreshed and better able to chase down her prey. She chuckled softly. Perhaps listening to these songs was not such a great idea if they made her think of poor, bald, pot-bellied Yandros as prey.

Rook was playing a new melody. The chalice song must have ended. This one seemed even more noble and more heart-rending than the last. Jassi strained to hear the words, but, since she had been careful to seat herself near the door, and as far from the bard's own seat as

possible, she found herself missing much of the plot. It seemed to focus on the exploits of another heroine and an old, tired, bitter dragon. Jassi was just starting to grasp the storyline when there was a sudden crash of broken crockery, and then the sound of chair legs scraping against the floor as a man rose to stand, leaning on a table in front and to the left of her.

"No more." The voice was cold and grim. "No more singing, bard. Your songs hold too much blood, too much pain."

Still strumming the melody line, Rook bowed his head elegantly at the speaker. "Many here enjoy my singing, friend. Perhaps, if you choose to give my songs the chance they deserve, you might also grow to appreciate them."

The man shook his head. From where she sat, Jassi could not see his face, but if it matched his voice she was sure she'd not want to be in the bard's place. His clothing was old and patched, farm wear. His hands, clenched on the table, were a farmer's, gnarled and work-worn. "I said, stop playing. No more of your songs, your magic."

"Magic, sir?" Rook's tone was as light and mocking as his smile. "My songs have only the magic of a skilled and creative musician, no more. Though I am, of course, flattered by your words." He bowed his head again, accepting tribute.

The farmer's knuckles whitened on the edge of the table. "If there is no magic in your tongue or harp, bard, tell me why my daughter chose that dragon's cave over my fields and hearth." He staggered out from behind the table, a bit unsteady, working his way through the silent crowd toward the bard.

Rook silently handed his harp to the serving girl, who had just refilled his wine glass. He smiled, a bit sadly, Jassi thought, and stretched his hands, palms up, towards the angry farmer. "I do not determine the paths of others, friend. I merely sing of their deeds. Heroes make their own choices."

The serving girl slowly and carefully walked across the room with Rook's harp in her hands, disappearing into the kitchen. The farmer stood, silent, breathing deeply. Stillness filled the room, in its own way as riveting as Rook's music.

"No." The farmer's voice was calmer, but even colder. "No, I will not believe you. You are not as innocent as you claim." His fists clenched, he breathed in deeply, and then the table crashed forwards, almost into the bard.

"Wait! Hold, you!" The innkeeper puffed up from behind the bar, wiping his hands on his smudged, white apron. "You are new in town, Trebast, but you know enough of our ways to realize that you can't go around attacking folk in my inn or breaking furniture and crockery." He smiled at the farmer, placing a hand, gentle for its weight, on the man's shoulder. "Calm yourself a bit and help us right that table, then have a drink on the house and listen to the good bard's songs. I'm sure he'll play something more to your liking." His grip on Trebast's shoulder tightened slightly. "Or, if you don't think yourself able to relax and enjoy the evening, go elsewhere."

"Quiet, innkeep." One of the farmer's three drinking mates had risen now, holding a heavy tankard in his callused hand. "Trebast has a right to speak. And a right to make this bard pay for his actions."

Another farmer stood, slamming his hand, palm open, into the innkeeper's chest, pushing him back, away from the bard. "Don't get involved here. Trebast has waited long enough to give this warbler what he deserves. We'll not let any interfere."

Trebast stood, facing the bard, rocking slightly back and forth, shaking his head, fists

clenched. He made no further move toward Rook, seeming almost not to have noticed the interference of his friends. As the fourth of the group got to his feet, Jassi could see other inn patrons squirming slightly, readying themselves for swift movement, or backing farther into shadow. For herself she hoped, like these last, to avoid the situation. She looked about for the serving girl, hoping to pay her bill and escape to the peace of her room.

The innkeeper was also scanning the tavern for the girl. Just as Jassi spotted her in the entrance to the kitchen, his voice rang out across the room. "Thifane, run and get the guard." The girl sprinted through the room toward the door, but the third of Trebast's companions intercepted her.

"No you don't, brat." He reached out to grab her by the arms. "What, are you all in this together? You'd best pick your friends more carefully." He shoved the girl to one side sharply. Her head hit the edge of Jassi's table, and she slid to the floor. "No one leaves this place while that bard stands." He moved to block the door.

"Hey!" Jassi barely recognised her own voice. She rose from her chair, walking around the table to face the man. "Leave her alone!" She stooped to check on Thifane. Breathing. Good. Around her she heard chairs creaking, tables moving slightly.

Suddenly, one of Thifane's eyes opened. One hand rose slightly, pointing under the table toward the door. Jassi raised her eyebrows slightly. Silently she mouthed, "Can you make it?" and was answered with a very faint, slow nod.

Jassi threw her an encouraging smile, then spun on her heels, around and up, fist swinging to strike the farmer in the gut. As he staggered to one side, Thifane scrambled to her feet, pushed open the door, and darted through it.

After that, Jassi sort of lost track of what was going on around her. It was not her first brawl. She had four well-grown siblings, after all, and had grown up in an inn. Still, she had little time to waste on gawking around at the other action. She did hear enough furniture breaking, bellows of rage and pain, and various thumps and crashes to know that she was not alone in her battle.

The farmer was both larger and stronger than Jassi, his muscles hardened by years spent behind a plough. Fortunately, he was also drunk and slow. Had he been sober, Jassi's speed and the few tricks she'd picked up over the years might not have been enough to keep her whole. If the farmer had been able to catch her, the fight would have been over quickly, but not pleasantly. As it was, Jassi managed, for the most part, to keep just ahead of his enraged swings and grabs long enough to sweep up a full glass of clear spirits from a nearby table and slosh it into his face. While he staggered, rubbing huge fists across his eyes, she scooped up a heavy chair and brought it down hard on the back of his head.

As her opponent slumped to the ground, Jassi realised that she was grinning. She swept her gaze around the room. The fight was still in full swing, with patrons taking both sides, as far as she could see, almost indiscriminately. The innkeeper was holding his own, bashing heads with a heavy tankard as he pushed his way toward the bar. She heard running feet coming up the street, hopefully the guard.

Then, without any reason she could explain, her eyes were drawn into a deeply shadowed corner. Rook stood there, alone and quiet. The fight circled by him, leaving him totally untouched. He was smiling slightly, fingers strumming at phantom, invisible harp strings.

And he was watching her.

Beside her, the door swung open. Five uniformed guards pushed past her into the room,

with Thifane close behind them. Within a few seconds, the fight was winding down. Then there was a silence, punctuated only by a few low groans and the heavy, burbling breathing of one woman whose nose had been broken.

"Well." The leading guard's voice was rich with sarcasm. "If you are all quite finished, I want everyone out of the tavern. If you live in town, go back to your homes. If you've rooms here, find them. The bar is closed for the night." He glanced at the innkeeper, who had reached the bar and was surveying his wrecked tavern with dismay. "Perhaps longer than just one night. Each of you brawlers can help to pay for this mess."

With a few sheepish looks, men and women started filing out of the tavern or up the stairs, many of them dropping coins on the bar or on the few still standing tables as they went. The farmer who had first accused Rook was crying softly as his friends, still scowling, helped him out.

Jassi turned to Thifane. "Can you show me which room is mine?"

The girl nodded and started to turn towards the stairs, then paused. "Are you sure you don't want my ma to take a look at your head first? She knows a good bit about treating wounds."

"My head?" Jassi reached up to touch the side of her head, which was throbbing dully. Her hair was wet and sticky. Not sweat sticky. She vaguely remembered her head hitting the doorframe as she dodged her opponent's charges. "Um. I guess, if it looks bad..." She shrugged, then regretted it, fighting to keep her supper down.

Thifane led her past the guards, who had seated themselves at the bar and were talking to the innkeeper. The bard had disappeared. Just as well. Jassi was less than pleased with him.

By the time Jassi reached the kitchen, her head was aching enough to make it hard to walk. The room was warm and just a bit smoky. Savoury steam escaped in wisps from pots set to simmer on a low stove. Seated where she could stir the pots, smiling calmly, was a small but powerfully built woman. The apron she wore did not quite conceal the fact that one of her legs was missing from the knee down. A crutch leaned against the wall close enough for the woman to grasp easily. She smiled at Thifane, then looked Jassi up and down.

"A casualty? Pass down my herb basket, 'Fane, and fetch me a bowl of warm water from the stove. That sounded like a tidy little battle." She smiled at her daughter, and then beckoned to Jassi. "Come here, girl, and kneel in front of me."

As Jassi complied, Thifane's mother rested a hand against her face, gently tilting her head to one side. Jassi felt old, long-hardened calluses against her cheek and the cold smoothness of a large ring. Fingers parted her hair.

"My name is Marja, dear, and I've seen enough wounds in my time to...hmm, not so bad as it looked."

Jassi relaxed slightly as her wound was washed out with warm water, then tensed again as she heard Thifane whispering softly to her mother.

"Ah, is she, indeed?" Marja's voice held some odd emotion. "You'd best go help your father, 'Fane. This young lady and I need to chat a bit."

Thifane headed for the tavern, smiling back at Jassi over her shoulder.

Marja sighed softly, pressing a compress against Jassi's head. "So you are Rook's latest."

Jassi shook her head, holding the compress in place with her own hand as she turned to face the older woman.

"I'm not quite sure what you mean by that. Rook and I just happened to travel together briefly. Tomorrow we each will go our own way...unless..." Jassi felt herself reddening slightly.

"Unless...you don't think...? He's truly not my type."

Marja's smile was tinged with bitterness. "No, he's not trying to seduce you...not in the way that you mean at any rate. I've seen the way he acts towards women he seeks to dally with, and from what my daughter says, you are not one." She reached to grasp Jassi's shoulders, looking deep into her eyes. "No, you he needs for something else entirely."

The pain in Jassi's head was starting to dull down again. Confusion was taking its place. "I don't understand."

Marja's hands dropped to her lap. She leaned back in her chair, eyes half closing. "Do you know why ravens follow wolves?"

The question was unexpected. "No, not really."

"Ravens are carrion birds. They feast on the kills of others. They follow wolves in the sure knowledge that where a wolf goes, there will be carnage." Marja smiled at Jassi's puzzled look. "Rook is a bard. He hunts down adventure like a raven does meat. Like the raven, he feeds off the battles of others."

Jassi shifted the compress to her other hand. "Um...ok." She crossed her legs in front of her, trying to get comfortable. "And Rook's been following me for a few days, so you think he's...no, that makes no sense."

Marja raised an eyebrow. "And why not?"

"Lady, I hate to offend you, but even if Rook takes after his namesake, I'm no wolf. I'm not seeking adventure, just an evasive cloth merchant. In a few weeks I'll be home preparing for my sister's wedding, not out fighting dragons."

"Oh, you're a wolf, girl...a young, inexperienced wolf, but a wolf nonetheless. Rook always knows." She smiled again, sadly. "Always." A tremor ran through her half leg. "He's been at his business for long years. He's far older than he looks. Almost always girls and not those you'd pick to look at. But he knows, and he follows. And he sings." She closed her eyes, her hands clasping and unclasping in her lap.

Jassi sat in silence. Then... "Look, he's wrong this time. I have to hunt down Yandros, then go back home. He's simply made a mistake, or you have."

"Really." Marja's voice was soft. "Maybe I am wrong. Maybe tomorrow you will leave here on your errand, and he won't be with you. Or maybe you'll just tell him to leave you alone. Rook's not an evil man. If you ask him to let you travel alone, he will. Maybe you'll catch up with Yandros. He often stops off in a town eight leagues north of here. Rockridge, it's called. He has a son living there. It's your choice."

Jassi let the silence stretch again. Finally she looked up at Marja, meeting her eyes. "There's one thing I just don't understand. Perhaps I am a wolf. Perhaps I am bound for adventure...but...you've said it yourself. I'm young, and the only real fighting I've done is in bar brawls. Even in those...well, if that farmer out there had been sober I'd be lucky to be alive! Wouldn't Rook choose an experienced wolf to travel with, one more likely to survive?"

Marja's face was unreadable. She took the compress out of Jassi's hand, checked the wound, then patted her shoulder softly. "Get off to bed with you, girl. I've work to do."

Sighing, frustrated, Jassi stood and turned to leave.

"Girl..." Marja's voice was very soft. Jassi turned to look at her.

The woman's head was bowed, one hand stroking a large, dark jewelled ring on the other. She spoke, not meeting Jassi's eyes. "Girl, you should have paid more attention to the bard's songs tonight. No matter what way the battles go, who wins, who loses, who lives, who dies...

still the carrion bird feasts."

* * *

Jassi left the town the next morning, heading north.
The bard followed her.

The End

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whomever he had been mind-talking with and met my eyes again.

"You asked when you will die," he said slowly, as though considering how best to answer. "You are a unique child. It has been almost two millennia since a child has grown to your age without experiencing first death. You would not understand the reasons why, but your first death must wait for nine more years, until you are sixteen."

I nodded my head and thought about this. Teacher had said that I must die so that I could live forever. I remembered how Teacher and I had once found a dead howler monkey lying at the edge of the forest—its eyes still wide with fear.

"What is death like?"

Grandfather sipped his hot tea and studied me.

"Why do you ask that? I know that your teacher has not neglected the biological sciences. Can you recite for me the classic definitions of first death and final death?"

I wanted him to see that I was a good student. I took a deep breath and quoted the definition word for word from my biology lessons.

"First death occurs when the brain's executive function ceases as indicated by the absence of its quantum signature. Final death occurs when all brain activity ceases."

"Now, why did you ask a question for which you already knew the answer?"

I shrugged my shoulders and looked down, not wanting to admit my fear of dying.

That night, as I climbed into my bed, I was still thinking about Grandfather. It had been wonderful being with him because he was like me. His hand was warm; he ate, drank, and even sneezed once.

I watched Teacher configure the learning field with my lessons for the night. Teacher looked almost human—except for its eyes, which were dull and lifeless compared to Grandfather's. I wondered if Teacher could die. It never seemed to feel pain; perhaps Teacher wasn't really alive.

"Teacher, what does it feel like when you are shutdown? Is it like dying?"

"It doesn't feel like anything. My cognitive functions are necessary to simulate both tactile feeling and basic emotions; therefore, I cannot experience either when my systems are off."

Teacher knelt, its face level with my own as it tucked the sheets into the bed. It did not have Grandfather's dark circles under its eyes, and the skin on its face was smooth, without one wrinkle.

"Please make the sheets extra tight," I said. As Teacher pulled the cold sheets taut, I looked into its eyes, searching for something there, but not knowing what.

"Is that what it will be like when I die?" I asked. "Will I feel nothing?"

"I don't know."

"I'm afraid to die," I said, choking on the last word. I pulled my arms out from under the covers and reached out. Teacher embraced me, our cheeks touching. Teacher's skin was soft and comforting, but it was cool against mine.

"Teacher, please don't turn the field on tonight. I promise not to complain if you turn it on every night for a week after Grandfather leaves."

"Master Zack, this was Senator Ambrosio's request. Your Grandfather wishes to review your learning response for himself."

I hated the learning field because of the nightmares it brought. Sometimes it also triggered seizures, and I would wake in the morning exhausted, every muscle in my body sore, my pillow wet with drool. That night, my dreams were worse than usual.

I found myself buried within a mountain of naked corpses. Horrified, I struggled to free

myself, only to emerge into a world completely covered by the bodies of the dead. Gently rolling hills of humanity stretched to the horizon.

The next morning I woke with my face slick with my own spittle, my bed soaked and stinking of urine. Embarrassed, I stripped the bed and myself, stuffing sheets and bedclothes into the laundry chute. My head hurt, and my thoughts were a confusing jumble of dream images and facts from the night's history lesson as I stumbled to the bathroom. I took a medication for my headache, then quickly showered and dressed, eager to see Grandfather again.

I found him eating breakfast on the veranda. He smiled at me and nodded at the empty chair. I sat down, and he pulled a holosheet from under his plate.

"Zack, I'm told that last night you were given an info dump on humanity's transition from the Postmodern Age to the Age of Immortality. I'm going to ask you some questions about that."

"Ok," I said. I tried to focus on Grandfather instead of my hunger and the dull ache behind my eyes.

He took an onyx stylus from his shirt pocket and tapped the holosheet. "What is significant about the year 2027?"

The words came to my lips without thinking, as though I had answered the question a hundred times before.

"In 2027, in the nonaligned nation of Oregon, a team of Pfitzer-Rousse scientists led by Alwyn Hamerose made a series of breakthroughs in understanding the quantum mechanics of consciousness. The culmination of their work was the successful transfer of the mind of an adult rhesus monkey to the brain of its own infant. The process killed the adult's body, but as the infant matured, it proved to have all of the mother's memories and skills. The following year, over Dr. Hamerose's objections, the procedure was duplicated on Pfitzer-Rousse's dying CEO."

I didn't completely understand what I had said. Feeling the nausea that often followed a night in the learning field, I reached for the water glass in front of me. As I did, an image came to my mind of a truck dumping bodies into a mile-long pit being dug by a huge coal excavation shovel. My hands shook as I brought the water to my lips. Grandfather was jotting on the holosheet and did not notice. I set the glass down and shoved my hands in my pockets.

He looked up and asked, "Given the religious uproar that followed, what factors enabled the broader adoption of this new medical technology?"

The words surged out of me again. "Oregon's deregulated embryo stem-cell industry and more progressive euthanasia laws enabled Pfitzer-Rousse to produce human infants for their clients. The rich and dying of the world came to them."

"And the geo-political consequences?"

"Potential immortality had implications for economics, politics, religion and social structures. Class warfare was inevitable. Leaders feared that making the procedure widely available would lead to a devastating population explosion."

"How did the crisis end?"

"A mutated retrovirus emerged in Asia and quickly spread around the globe. It was never determined which extremist group engineered the virus. Genetic resistance was added to the new crops of host infants for immortals, but no cure could be found and the remaining mortals continued to succumb to the disease. There was global panic and a massive program to transfer the minds of the world's best and brightest into millions of new infants. By 2065, the earth's population had stabilized at just over 1 billion, all of them immortals. The world senate declared—"

At that point, to my great shame, I vomited onto the breakfast table.

* * *

I was nine the first time I snuck out of the estate. I loved the sights and sounds of the cloud forest, but Teacher rarely took me down there. The estate's front entrance was the only way out, but I couldn't touch the door without Teacher knowing it. However, there was a towering romerillo tree, over twenty meters tall, with branches reaching almost to the veranda.

Alone, I climbed up onto the flat cedar rail. I walked heel to toe along it, nearly losing my balance when I glanced down at the ground far below. I stopped at the point closest to the romerillo. It seemed to be holding its soft branches out, beckoning me. The nearest branch was below the deck and three meters away. I didn't think about it, I just crouched and sprang for the tree.

In my dreams, I had often flown with outstretched arms, soaring over the mist-shrouded forest. But this time I fell. My hands grabbed the thin branch. It bowed toward the distant ground and snapped. I fell, grasping at air. Two more branches broke before my stomach hit one strong enough to hold me.

Above me, Teacher's face stared down at me in horror. I ignored his shouts and swung down to the next limb. I had two hours of fun and freedom in the forest before the security aibots found me. The next day, they cut down the romerillo.

* * *

When I was ten, Teacher took me to the nursery as part of a lesson on reproductive biology. By then I understood that Grandfather wasn't actually my grandfather. The term "grandfather" means father of your father. It dated back to the days of sexual procreation. I thought 'Great-uncle' better described Grandfather's relationship to me since we did share a common gene line.

Plexiglas wombs held more than a dozen embryos and three larger fetuses. The biggest was almost as long as my forearm. It was a male and had dark hair like mine. I touched the glass and felt a slow throbbing rhythm.

"What is the drumbeat?" I asked.

"That is to simulate a maternal heartbeat," Teacher answered. "Without it, fetus survival rate drops from seventeen percent to less than one percent."

The large fetus moved his hand to his mouth and began sucking on his thumb. I felt a thrill. I leaned close to the glass and studied his face.

"Hello, little baby," I said.

He opened his eyes and looked at me. Enraptured, I stared back.

"Is he a clone of me?" I finally asked.

"No. Cloning was a dead-end technology. Simple in vitro fertilization produced this fetus and the others."

"Are all of them boys?" I asked. The baby suddenly kicked both feet out against the side of the womb so that it floated to the other side. It seemed pleased with the accomplishment.

"Most are male. This one," he said, pointing to the second largest, "is female. Master Ambrosio's only grows female infants in order to harvest their eggs. The ova are forced to maturity, genetically modified, and fertilized to begin a new generation."

"How many generations have there been?"

"This genetic line has progressed through more than two thousand generations of eugenic evolution. It is one of the strongest lines on the planet."

Teacher picked up a holosheet. "Let's examine the genetic differences between this fetus and you," he said, calling up a genetic comparison display. "Yes, this one includes new improvements in night vision, an increased anti-viral response, and skin cells with greater anti-oxidant production. However, it lacks your unique genetic modification to retain brain plasticity."

"What is brain plasticity?" I asked, feeling pride at being unique.

"Plasticity measures mental adaptability. Infant brains have a high degree of brain plasticity. It enables rapid acquisition of language and social skills. This plasticity begins to decline steeply after age three, and it is gone by age seven. That is why all successful mind transplants have used hosts less than forty months old. Older host brains reject the transplanted mind. The disadvantage of infant hosts is that the transplanted immortal must cope with significant physical and mental limitations until the new body grows to maturity.

"That is what makes you unique. If successful, yours will be the first adolescent brain to become a host. Your intensive learning program is critical to maintaining your brain's plasticity. That is why you must continue using the learning field."

* * *

I practiced judo, gymnastics, or swimming every day—unless the learning field had made me too sick. Teacher said these would optimize my body's strength, flexibility, and endurance. Each day, after my physical training, I visited the nursery.

I named the large male fetus Buddy. The two smaller ones were Theano and Pythagoras. I talked to all three but mostly to Buddy. Often, the sound of my voice would make him smile and kick his legs.

The nursery aibot aborted Theano and Pythagoras. Teacher said they showed minor "epigenetic instability in their stem cells," something I would learn about in my molecular biology lessons. I didn't want to know. Their deaths made me sad, but most of all I was scared that the same thing might happen to Buddy. Teacher reassured me that it would not.

Teacher brought me to the nursery for Buddy's birth. I thought it was funny how the womb flushed him down a tube. The nursery aibot, a feminine model, grabbed him by the ankles and lifted him into the air. It used a vacuum tube to suck mucus out of his mouth and nose. I laughed, but it sure made Buddy mad, and he cried. When the vacuum turned off, I talked to him and told him that it would be okay. That calmed him down. After the nursery aibot cleaned Buddy up and bundled him tightly in a soft blanket, I got to hold him for a few minutes. It felt great.

The best part of every day was the time I spent with Buddy. At first, the nursery aibot barely tolerated my presence. I watched it rock him while it talked and sang in a soft female voice. Buddy liked that, so I did the same things, but I just used my regular voice. He liked me better.

Buddy grew bigger and louder. When he was eight months old, I tried to teach him to say my name.

"Say Zack," I said.

He just grinned and drooled. He put a soft rubber ring in his mouth and chewed. I guessed another tooth was coming in. I pulled the ring out and put my face in front of his.

"I'm Zack; you're Buddy," I said. "I'm your brother."

"Bubba!" he said. He laughed and hit my nose with the ring. I laughed too. I picked Buddy up under his arms. The nursery aibot wasn't looking, so I tossed Buddy in the air and caught him. He laughed and said "Bubba!" again. We played the game until the aibot saw us. It threw a fit.

* * *

Grandfather visited again the next April, just after Buddy turned one year old.

"Grandfather!" I called as the aibot pilot opened the flyer's hatch and Grandfather stepped out. I ran to him and threw my arms around him, feeling the warmth of his body. Then I felt a sharp pain in my shoulders as strong mechanical hands pulled me away.

"Pilot, release the boy. He is not a threat to me," Grandfather said. The aibot released me. I reached for my Grandfather again, but he took hold of my hands and held them at arm's length. "Boy, you are growing into a young man, and men prefer to shake hands when they greet each other." He shook my hand and turned to walk up the long marble steps of the estate.

"Come and see Buddy," I said, pursuing him and taking hold of his large hand.

"Yes, I heard that you have made a pet of one your backups," he said with a wrinkled smile.

I pulled him downstairs to the nursery. When we entered, Buddy looked up from where he sat on the floor and greeted me with outstretched arms, "Bubba! Bubba! Hug!"

"Did you hear that?" I said. "And look, he can walk too." I pulled Buddy to his feet and moved away. He teetered and then proudly walked a dozen steps to me. Buddy grinned.

"That's a neat trick you've taught it," Grandfather said. "I read the reports that show this one is well ahead of the projected developmental milestones. Maybe my nursery aibot should learn a few things from you." He turned to leave, calling back over his shoulder, "Now I have a call to make before we have dinner."

I was sure that he was proud of Buddy. I gave Buddy a hug, told him he did great and then hurried to follow Grandfather upstairs.

As it turned out, Grandfather didn't have time to say much more than "good morning" and "good night" over the next two days. I often saw him pacing in his office. I guessed he was talking with someone by mind-link. His dour expressions worried me. I asked him what was wrong.

"Politics," he said.

"But, Grandfather, you are a Senator." I said it as though that should settle everything.

He smiled. "I wish it were that simple. This body is aging and my term as President Pro-Tem of the Senate will end with it. Even one of the eldest cannot rule from the body of an infant, and those who oppose me are planning to use that time to undo much of what I have accomplished. But, don't you worry. You and I will have a surprise for them."

He invited me to sit in the corner of his study, after I finished my lessons. It made me feel good just to be in the same room with him. He left early the fourth morning without saying good-bye.

Teacher said Grandfather was very busy and it would likely be more than a year before I saw him again. I was glad to have Buddy. We played whenever I had free time. I loved to make him laugh. I begged for permission to take Buddy out of the nursery. Teacher agreed but closely supervised our explorations of the estate. Buddy loved it; everything was new to him.

He wanted to learn the words for everything he saw. Sometimes he got bossy, telling me what games he wanted to play and throwing a fit if I said no. Once he smacked me in the nose. It really hurt, but I would never hit him back. I loved him.

* * *

Every night for a week, my lessons had focused on bioinformatics and the technology of transpossession, the key to human immortality.

That February morning, Teacher and I stood on the veranda and looked down on the forest. January and February are the driest months of the year; only a few patches of clouds clung to the trees below.

"Summarize the development of the human mind with respect to self-awareness," Teacher asked.

"Quantum signatures can be detected in the budding fetal brain six weeks after fertilization. There is speculation that a signature may develop earlier, but it cannot be detected with current technology. This core signature remains unchanged, but additional quantum field activity can be seen as the various areas of the brain develop. The developing mind is not considered fully human until it is self-aware. Current law states that an undamaged child is considered self-aware fifty months after fertilization and has all the rights of personhood."

"Good. And what happens during the transpossession of a mind?"

"A quantum seed, a quantum-computing device, is placed in the brain of the host. The executive function of the host brain is halted to bring about first death. The seed receives the quantum signature and memories of the transplanted mind and overlays then onto the host brain. The quantum seed's secondary purpose is to augment the brain's executive function and provide a link to the mind-net."

* * *

A week after I turned twelve, Plato was born. I named him after a philosopher because his tiny face always looked so serious. Philosophy was not part of my learning curriculum, but I had read about it and alchemy in a history lesson on false sciences.

At first, Buddy was jealous of any attention I gave to Plato. It wasn't much of a problem because most of the time Plato was sleeping or being fed by the nursery aibot. Slowly Buddy came to like Plato and would even talk to him and give him toys.

* * *

Buddy was almost three and a half when he died. Our last evening together, we all laughed as Plato kicked over the walls and towers of small boxes as fast as Buddy and I built them.

"Bubba, take us to Garden," Buddy said, standing up.

"*The* garden," I corrected. "Sorry, but it's too late. It's almost time for bed."

"Put Plato in bed. Take me to da Garden."

Plato turned to Buddy and shouted, "No!"

I lifted Plato before he could hit Buddy. "We'll all play in the garden tomorrow. Now, if you both climb into bed I'll read to you."

After the story, Buddy hugged me tight and would not let go. I had to pull his arms from around my neck. I wonder if he sensed that moment was our goodbye.

The next morning I went to wake Buddy, but he was gone. The nursery aibot was cleaning Buddy's sleeping cubicle. Somehow, I knew he wasn't anywhere. My knees shook, and my whole body felt weak.

"Wh-where is Buddy?" I asked the aibot .

"That infant was expired," it said, nodding at a large opaque plastic bag on the floor.

"No," I whispered. The outline of a small hand showed against the inside of the bag. Loss and anger swept over me; tears welled up in my eyes. I rushed to the bag and opened it until I could see Buddy's pale face.

"You murdered him!" I screamed, and I leapt onto the nursery aibot. It fell onto Buddy's bed, and I pummeled it with my fists. I dug my fingernails into its face and ripped the artificial skin and soft flesh of its cheeks. Pink globs of liquid silicon fell onto the bed sheets.

The aibot struggled to stand up, and I fell to the floor. I saw its horrible, disfigured face. I scooped up Buddy's plastic wrapped body in my arms and ran from the nursery. Bouncing off the walls, I raced through the hallways and into the foyer. I pushed open one of the great doors with my shoulder. The early morning fog reached out to me, and I plunged into it. I expected to be stopped. Perhaps the fog hid me or the security aibots no longer guarded the door since I had not tried to go out alone in over a year. I found the narrow path that led down the steep slope and hurried down, not stopping even when I reached the jungle of soaring trees and hanging vines.

That night, I slept cradled between two great cedar roots with Buddy next to me. In the morning I found a stream and drank from its cool water. White stones the size of eggs lay under the water. A solemn howler monkey watched as I dug the rocks out, washed them, and stacked them in a small pyramid near Buddy. Then I sat down and used sticks and my hands to dig a shallow grave beside the marker.

I kissed my brother and laid his body in the hole. After I covered his face with the soft black earth, I wept. The howler monkeys answered with their mournful songs.

I lived on avocados, nuts, and nightshade berries for ten days. When the security aibots found me, it was only because I wanted them to. I went back for Plato, but he was gone. Teacher said Grandfather had moved him to another estate.

* * *

Months went past without a message or visit from Grandfather. My hot anger cooled, condensing into a hard shell of bitterness, loneliness, and purposelessness. My sole satisfaction came from spoofing the feedback system of the learning field. I had to sleep on the floor, but it was a price I gladly paid to avoid the nightmares.

One day while randomly searching the computer library, I stumbled upon a source of relief and escape. It was the literature of the second millennium. Shakespeare, Johnson, Milton, Dante, and many others became my companions. I found music as well; I loved Bach, Mozart, and Bob Dylan. I printed holos of artwork from the Renaissance period and put them on the walls of my room. I began to feel alive again.

I read tragic stories of love and loss, stories of longing and fulfillment, stories of evil vanquished and justice done. Sometimes, in the privacy of my room, I would turn down the lights and let the rising tempo of the music lift me and carry me to places far from the mountain. I would dance in the moonlight, spinning wildly to the music and leaping through the air in

perfect arcs.

Bursting from my room one day, I asked Teacher for paints and canvas. Happy to see me emerge from my hermit's cave, he said there were none but they could be made. I spent days on the veranda. I painted the mountains as great stone dragons, curled around the valley below, filling the forest with the fog of their breath to hide something there. What I produced looked horrid compared to the paintings of the masters, but it pleased me that I had made them.

With much bargaining, cajoling, and even a veiled threat, I convinced Teacher to allow me to go into the forest and paint. I hiked down into the Yungas, surrounded by Teacher and four security aibots. The air was cool and heavy with the moisture that nourished everything and muffled the forest sounds. I walked reverently among the massive pillars of cedars. Ferns and moss hung like prophet's beards from the branches of the trees. We came to a swift stream. I dipped my hand into the cold cascade and thought of the stream near Buddy's grave a few kilometers farther into the forest.

The day was wonderful and passed as a moment. I painted in silence, trying to capture all of the beauty that was there. Colors of the forest filled the canvas; it was good, but something was missing. I tossed the half-finished canvas aside and reached for another. Teacher looked at me with concern.

"Master Zack, do you feel all right? You have said nothing in hours. Are you happy?"

I laughed and answered, "Shakespeare wrote, 'Silence is the perfectest herald of joy: I were but little happy, if I could say how much.'"

I spent weeks in the forest, one day slapping and scarring the canvas with colors, the next day caressing and gently stroking. I painted ferns and towering strangler trees, glasswing butterflies, hummingbirds and a Quetzal—the Mayan Phoenix. My skills improved immensely, but I felt I had not yet captured the essence of the life that permeated everything around me.

Then, one morning, I saw a flower on the forest floor where I had discarded it the day before. Even with wilted petals, dulled colors, and leaves with curled black edges, it remained beautiful. Something about it tapped a well of sorrow deep inside of me. Tears blurred my eyes as I took my palette and brush in hand. When I had finished I looked at what I had made and wept. I wept for Buddy and Plato; I wept for Theano and Pythagoras; I wept for me.

I ran up the steps of the estate, leading a parade of four security aibots. I threw open the door and burst into the foyer. "Teacher! Come and look!" I called.

"Master Zack, what is it?" Teacher asked as it entered from a hall.

I turned the canvas to show him.

"A flower on a leaf," Teacher said, taking the canvas to hold up in the sunlight that streamed in from the glass roof. "It is a good representation, but you have done others that were more realistic. This flower is at an early stage of decay. And the mixture of shadow and light across it makes most of the colors appear dark and muddled."

"Can't you see? It is more than just a flower. It is beauty, bruised and into death, but undiminished."

"Are you feeling all right, Master Zack?" The expression on the aibot's face shifted from confusion to concern.

"Never mind," I said, shaking my head as I took the painting to my room.

* * *

Three days later Grandfather arrived in the midst of a storm. It was clearly an unplanned

trip.

"You have exhausted my patience," he raged as soon as he entered the foyer. Rainwater dripped from his hair and nose. "You have broken our agreement; you disabled the learning field. Who knows how much plasticity has been lost from your brain? This is a critical time in the Senate; I don't have time for this."

I stood my ground and met his gaze, but I said nothing. I had already decided that I would never submit myself to the torture of that machine again.

Then he saw my paintings; more than twenty of them hung all around the foyer. He turned slowly, looking in silence.

I thought that he was amazed by what I had done. I quickly took my painting of the dying orchid from the wall and brought it to show him. He took it from me, but he held it at arm's length, as someone might hold a poisonous snake.

"I cannot imagine why you would want to litter the halls with these images, much less spend your valuable time creating something so flawed. You are finished painting. You will return to the plan of studies assigned to you."

With those last words, he ripped the thin canvas from the frame and tore it in two. I looked at him in horror; my anger at him warring with my fear of him and my desperate need for his approval. I tried but could not hold back the tears.

"Why do you destroy everything I love?" I demanded. "I hate you!"

I ran into my room and slammed the door behind me. I could not lock the door, so I pushed a heavy cabinet against it.

The next morning, I found two security aibots standing outside my room. My paints and canvases were gone. The aibots followed me everywhere, and, though I tried, they would not let me leave the grounds of the estate.

* * *

I continued to refuse the learning field. I wouldn't even look at Teacher or respond to any questions. A week later, I stopped eating. After the first ten days, the feeling of hunger was gone, and I felt a surprising new strength.

Grandfather returned on the thirteenth day of my fast. He came into my room, red-faced and angry. I set my book down but did not get up from the bed.

"I don't have time for this, but here I am. Your childish prank has accomplished its purpose. Now tell me why you won't eat. Is it because of that painting? Is it because I didn't let you keep your pet?"

How dare he compare Buddy to an animal! I stood up slowly and glared back at him. I was his equal in height now; my eyes looked directly into his.

"Buddy was my brother."

"Rubbish. He was not even a person. He was only a host… perhaps a potential person."

"He was more real to me than you, and I loved him."

"Fine. I'll have that other host—what did you call it—Plato, brought back if you will stop this foolishness. I have dozens of other hosts around the world, but you are unique and critically important to my plans."

"Is that why you killed Buddy? Because he was no longer useful to you?" My jaw clenched. The room felt hot.

Grandfather turned away, throwing his hands up in frustration. "Your Teacher shouldn't

have allowed you to form an emotional attachment to the other hosts. It should have anticipated this."

Grandfather took a deep breath, turned back to me, and tried to speak more softly. "Listen, Zack, there are legal requirements you don't understand. Strict laws that regulate the circumstances under which a host may be grown beyond the point of self-awareness."

His patronizing tone only fed the fury building in me. I stepped closer to him and pointed my finger at his face.

"Don't try to feed me some legal crap. Did you forget that you shoved the entire global legal code into my brain while I slept? I know that you authored that law during your first term in the Senate. I also know why. You and your immortal cronies had killed off the last of the mortals you called 'filthy, breeding animals' and you wanted to be sure they never came back."

With flaring nostrils, Grandfather drew himself up, projecting his full authority.

"I have served thirty-seven terms as Senator-for-life. I have been President Pro Tem for almost twenty years. You will sit down *now* and speak to me with the respect that I deserve."

When I did not move, he reached out with both hands and shoved me back. My anger swept away reason. It was easy to grab his sleeves and let my weight drop backward. As I fell, my foot met his chest, and I threw him over me with all the fury that burned inside of me. His head hit the wall with a loud crack, and he collapsed into an awkward heap. There was blood smeared on the wall. The security aibots rushed into the room. One grabbed my wrists in a bone-crushing grip and dragged me out and down the hall. Teacher rushed by with a horrified look on its face.

* * *

I lay on a table in the room next to the nursery. I could not move or even feel my body. The inhibitor that pierced my spinal cord between the fourth and fifth vertebrate had left me paralyzed. They put Grandfather on another table near me. His body was limp with his head and neck immobilized by a brace. There was blood on his head and clothes, but his eyes turned to look at me. I could see fear in his eyes. Some part of me pitied him, perhaps even still loved him. I regretted what I had done.

Teacher gently clamped my head into the center of a heavy blue metal ring. Short, thorn-like needles pierced my scalp, and I felt a trickle of blood drip into my ear.

"Grandfather, do not do this," I said. "This is wrong. I will die. I will cease to exist."

Grandfather was silent. Teacher lifted my head and halo and then laid them back into a black half-sphere.

"In one sense you will continue to exist," Teacher said in a soothing tone. "Remember what you have learned. Your identity is rooted in your memories and those memories will be merged with Senator Ambrosio's."

"But after the transpossession, there will be only one person, not two."

"Correct," Teacher said, as though this was just another lesson.

I turned my eyes toward Grandfather. "Grandfather, will that person be me with your memories, or will it be you?"

He looked at me without pity. He struggled to speak, slurring some of his words. "I have lived eighteen centuries. I will continue, but your memories will be a part of me."

Teacher rested something sharp on the top of my head. I felt pressure and heard the drill. A metal capsule containing the quantum seed was inserted. I knew that it was burrowing

toward the center of my brain, but I could not feel it.

"No!" I cried. "Listen! I am a human being. I am more than just a collection of information. The ancients were right. There is a piece of eternity, a spirit or soul, which is at the heart of the human mind. I saw that light in Buddy; I have found it in myself."

Teacher lifted the other half of the black sphere, preparing to close it over my face. I realized then, there was no mercy in the room because mercy is a human trait. I pitied Grandfather, a soulless being that could know fear but not compassion.

"You are not human, Grandfather. The man you call your original host. He was human. You may have his memories, but his soul is gone. He murdered a child and raped its mind. He murdered his own soul when he copied his consciousness to the quantum processor in the dead child's brain. How many more have you murdered for your immortality? You are not human. All of you immortals are machines. You have become mechanical parasites that kill their human hosts and inhabit the bodies. Remember this when I am gone."

Grandfather's eyes half closed; his face turned paler. "Don't wait. Do it now," he whispered.

"But Senator Ambrosio, the host is not-"

"Now!" croaked Grandfather.

The sphere closed over my face, and a black suffocating shadow rushed into my mind. But I was an unquenchable flame burning brightly in the darkness.

He tried to bury me under a mountain of his memories. I climbed as the mountain grew under me; sharp rocks and jagged bones bruised me. I climbed for hours, overcome with grief for all that he had done. When I reached the summit, he was there, naked, trembling in fear. I reached out, embracing him, my soul's compassion burning him. He tried to push me away and fell from the precipice. I dove after him, grasping him and pulling him to me as we splashed into a deep, cold river. Though my fire still burned him, he now clung to me, and we floated together until the river finally spilled into a dark sea.

* * *

The firelight made shifting shadows on the young faces turned toward the old man seated on a tree stump. Some squinted skeptically, but the eyes of most were wide with shock. They waited, but Ambrosio was silent. He stared at a small pyramid of smooth white stones on the forest floor. His hands were shaking from the combination of emotions, great age, and the cold damp air. If his swollen, arthritic joints did not hurt so much, he would get up and put more wood on the fire. He coughed. His chest hurt; there was pneumonia in his lungs.

"Is there no more to tell, Grandfather?" asked a quiet voice from across the fire. They all called him Grandfather—he had not been Senator Ambrosio for nearly a century. He squinted to make out the girl's face.

"That is where Zack's memories come to an end," he said, searching the stunned expressions of the young men and women around him. He shivered, wondering again why they didn't rise up in righteous anger and kill him. Pity for an old man, he supposed.

Solid young Caleb stood up to retrieve two thick logs from the stack and set them carefully in the fire. A late growth spurt made him the tallest of the teens. Next to Ambrosio, Rachel rose to her knees, took off her shawl and draped it over the old man's shoulders and curved back.

"Thank you," Ambrosio said and reached out to squeeze her hand.

"Please, Grandfather, go on," Rachael said. "Tell us what *you* remember."

Ambrosio glanced around the fire to be sure all fifteen of them were looking at him.

"Blood was hemorrhaging into my brain—I was certain I was dying. The aibot called Teacher began the transfer too soon; Zack's consciousness was not yet gone. When my mind rushed into his, I saw him, a bright burning sun, and I was afraid. In desperation, I tried to engulf him and crush him with eighteen centuries of memories, eighteen centuries of power, dominance, anger, and self-hatred, but Zack accepted it all and only burned brighter.

"Zack held me, and we floated in a dark sea. Then something terrifying—no, it was *someone,* overshadowed us, as though the starless sky had descended to brood over water. The memory still makes me shudder. Then Zack was gone, leaving me in darkness. Alone and blind, I was lost for a long time in that infinite sea, my only sustenance was Zack's memories. Memories of beauty, love, and loss that have both pierced my heart and given me hope these ninety years.

"When I woke, I stayed off the mind-net so that both my enemies and allies would be unsure if I was alive or dead. Their uncertainty gave me time to secretly retrieve Plato and the other hosts and bring them to my estate above the cloud forest. I left the rest of my assets unprotected so the jackals would be convinced that I was truly dead. We were safe for a few years, but I feared that someone would eventually learn of it. So, when the children were old enough we moved down into the forest, and I set fire to the estate."

Ambrosio sighed wearily and looked down again at the white stones; he whispered something to them.

A tall man with a short white beard stepped from the shadows to stand beside Ambrosio.

"Come, Grandfather, you must rest now."

The old man rose slowly and handed the shawl back to Rachel. The two men walked slowly toward a small hut.

"Plato, I have tried to love and care for you and the others as Zack would have."

"You have done well. You know that Zack would be pleased."

"Did I tell you that you should move everyone down into the Amazon valley?"

"Yes, Grandfather. When the time comes, we will go."

The End

David's first published story, "The Fall," appeared in the May 2005 issue of "Deep Magic."

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continued from page 16

Ishara, standing on the balcony of the Citadel. Mardak gazed at her in wonder, for she was very beautiful, far more so than any of the painted harlots of Tarlith. He desired her then, in the dark places of his heart, and left without saying another word.

Now Ishara often went to the Citadel's eastern courtyard, the Court of Women, for the women of the Citadel bathed in the garden's fountains. In the heat of the day, Ishara went to bathe in the Court's fountains. Mardak learned of this and, by cunning guile, entered unseen into the Citadel and hid in the Court's bushes to watch Ishara bathe. Her nakedness inflamed his heart, and his lust burned like fire.

"Surely," he thought to himself, "I must possess this woman, for my flesh desires her body greatly. Yet if I lay hand upon her, she shall call the guards, and I shall perish. What must I do? I shall craft a charm to beguile her mind and fill her heart with lust, and then I shall take her."

Even as this thought entered his mind, he saw movement in the shadows. Fearing discovery, he pulled a dagger from his robes and moved to strike. To his amazement, he saw Erashur, his rival, standing behind a tree and watching Ishara bathe.

"Villain!" said Mardak. "Do you wish to interfere in my plans, even here in this uncouth land?"

Erashur gazed at Mardak in amazement, and said: "Blackguard! I knew not that you were here. Have you come to meddle in my designs? For this woman, Ishara of Sarthepolis, is the fairest I have seen, and I have come to spirit her away and add her to my harem in Tarlith."

Mardak laughed. "Indeed? A strange coincidence! For I myself have come to desire her. Shall we fight to claim her?"

"Bah! What is a woman, that we should slay each other over her?" answered Erashur. "Yet why should we fight on her account? In a few years she shall be old and withered and of no further use to any man. Let us agree to share her, to take our pleasure on her in turns, until she is worn out and discarded."

This advice seemed good to Mardak. From that day forward, Mardak and Erashur put aside their enmity, and became friends.

"Come, then," said Mardak, "let us put forth our powers, and craft a charm of great power so that lust shall cloud the mind of this woman, and she shall submit to us."

So Mardak and Erashur withdrew to their dwelling in the city, combined their magic, and wrought a charm of great cunning. Yet it could gain no hold over Ishara, for she was a woman of great virtue and had lain with no man, save her husband Darian. The failure filled both men with great fury and redoubled their desire. For does not forbidden fruit excite the heart? Mardak and Erashur continued to come unseen into the Court of Women, until one day when she bathed alone, without the aid of her maids.

"Come!" said Erashur to Mardak. "Now is our chance, for she is alone." Both men stepped from the shadows and came to her.

Ishara sprang from the fountain and pulled her cloak about her. "Villains! Do you not know that it is death for any man to enter the Court of Women?"

"We care not for your laws, woman," said Erashur, "for we are above them."

"Cast aside your cloak," said Mardak, "expose your nakedness, and lie with us, for we have long watched you, and our desire for you is very great."

"Lechers!" said Ishara. "Shall I dishonor myself, and my husband, by lying with two degenerate sorcerers? Nay, nay, a thousand times nay!"

Her words kindled Mardak to wrath, and he said, "Hold your haughty tongue, woman.

You shall submit to us, or we shall force you, and bring ruin on your husband, for we have powers that you do not understand."

"Nay!" said Ishara. "I shall not dishonor my husband, not even if the Great King himself bade me." She cursed them and said: "And even if I were to betray my husband, I certainly would not do so with a pair of withered old men, weak and impotent." Ishara shouted for the guards, and Mardak and Erashur fled unseen into the city, and her husband Darian made them outlaws.

Now although the Great King had divided his realm into one hundred and forty-four satrapies, it was his custom to send his servants throughout the civilized lands to watch for corruption and incompetence, and men called these servants the Watchers of the Great King. Three days after Mardak and Erashur had fled, a Watcher came to the city of Shalifane, accompanied by a thousand of the Great King's soldiers. The Watcher inspected all details of Darian's government and was well-pleased, for Darian had ruled Amariel wisely.

Mardak and Erashur heard rumor of the Watcher's coming and said to one another: "Let us return to the city and present false evidence of Darian's treachery before the Watcher." For Mardak was word-crafty, and Erashur most skilled with his hands. "And we shall manufacture letters that prove Darian's treason. Then we shall have our vengeance on Ishara, and we shall take her as our own."

So Mardak wrote a letter in Darian's own hand, offering the satrapy of Amariel to the seafaring Daeolian barbarians in exchange for gold. Erashur wrought a seal in perfect imitation of Darian's own. Together they traveled to the city and prostrated themselves before the Watcher.

"May the Great King live forever, oh worthy servant!" they said. "Let your servants speak before you."

The Watcher looked at them and wondered and said: "Are you not Mardak and Erashur, magicians of Tarlith, whom Lord Darian has condemned for daring to approach his wife? Why should I heed you? For I have inspected Darian's government in the name of the Great King and have been well-pleased with what I have seen."

"Hear us, worthy servant," said Mardak, "for Lord Darian has slandered and banished us, for we threatened to expose his plot against the Great King."

"Indeed," said Erashur, "Lord Darian is the darkest of serpents."

Then the Watcher's heart wavered, for he had seen much treachery and laid low many men who claimed to love the Great King while plotting ruin. He said: "Have you any basis for these accusations?"

"See, worthy servant!" said Mardak, surrendering the false letter. "The traitor Darian has plotted to surrender Amariel to the barbarians for money!"

The Watcher read the letter, and his wrath blazed like flame. "See!" he cried. "Is this letter not written in Darian's own hand? And has not this seal been made with his own signet ring, which according to the laws of the Sarthians must never leave his finger? Here indeed is black treachery!"

Then the Watcher took the Great King's soldiers and stormed the Citadel and placed all of Darian's household under arrest. Darian, realizing that some disaster had befallen his house, hastened to Ishara's chambers.

"My wife," he said, "you must flee at once! The Great King has removed his goodwill from us, and our fortunes crumble. You must go, lest you be made a slave or worse." Even as he spoke the soldiers of the Great King hammered at the door.

"My husband," cried Ishara, "how can I leave your side? Is not my place with you?

Someone has leveled false charges against you, and we shall overcome them."

The soldiers broke down the door and took them into custody. The Watcher stripped Darian of his robes of office and bound him with iron chains and an iron collar. Ishara, however, he kept locked in her chambers, for she was a great lady of Sarthepolis, and Mardak and Erashur had leveled no charge against her.

Ishara paced her chamber long into the night, in deep dread, and fearing what evil fate morning might bring. Even as she paced, the door opened, and Mardak and Erashur entered.

Mardak spat on her and said: "Did we not warn you? You would have been wise to submit to us, lady. Else now your husband would not suffer the fate that awaits him."

"This was your doing, villain!" said Ishara.

"Now we shall take you," said Erashur, "and take our pleasure on you, and you will curse our names."

But Ishara was young and strong and slipped away from Erashur's grasp and fled from them. Mardak called for the guards, but Ishara fled from the Citadel. Seeing her escape, they hastened to the Watcher.

"See, worthy servant," they said, "Ishara, wife of Darian, flees! Is she not an accomplice to Darian's villainy? Take her at once, ere she escapes." So the Watcher sent the soldiers into the city to take her. Ishara, fearing for the lives of the people, fled from the city and vanished into the desert.

Mardak cursed her, and said: "Let her flee! For the Sarbian desert devours caravans of strong men. What chance does one woman have? Let her go! For though we may not have supped at the table of her delights, we are nonetheless avenged for her impudent slights." And Erashur agreed with him.

The Watcher took Darian and all his household and marched north along the Great King's highway, taking Darian to Sarthepolis for judgment. With him came Mardak and Erashur, eager to receive the reward of the Great King.

Now Ishara intended to travel to Sarthepolis herself, to plead the cause of her husband, but soon became lost in the trackless desert. She suffered greatly from the burning sun, for she had neither food nor water. Soon she came to a boulder and laid herself down in the shade, intending to die.

"For," she said, "what have I to live for? My husband is accused of treason and shall hang from the Great King's gallows. If I am found, I shall hang with him. But I shall never see my husband again, even in death, for I am lost in this desert. All is lost in despair and defeat. Better that I lie here and die." And even as she spoke these words, it seemed that they came true, for the black-cloaked shape of Death walked towards her, unaffected by the heat and sand.

"See, woman of Sarth," said the black-cloaked shape, "why do you lie here?"

Then Ishara looked up in wonder, for the black-cloaked shape was not Death but a mortal man, paler of skin than the peoples of the Sarthian Kingdom, raven-haired and bearded. His gaze and manner were kindly. He gave her a skin of water, and she drank and felt some of her strength return.

"Sir," she said in wonder, "who are you, to walk alone in this desolate land?"

"I have been given many names," said the man, "but you may call me Arraeth, of Siluria, and I have wandered far."

"Of Silura!" said Ishara, astonished. "Men say that Siluria lies far in the west, over the Inner Sea and across high mountains and deep forests and many nations of barbarians. I have never seen any man of Siluria, nor ever believed that land aught more than legend." She looked

at his regal bearing and stern face. “Could it be that you are one of the wise men of that land, called the Druids, men who know the secrets of earth and the stars and time?”

“Does rumor of my people reach even here?” said Arraeth. “Siluria lies in the farther sea beyond the barbarian lands, wrapped in mist at the edge of the world. And some do call my brotherhood Druids. But come! I have seen many strange things in my travels, but never have I seen a lone noblewoman dying in the desert.”

“Sir, it would have indeed been better if you had left me to die,” said Ishara. “For my tale is a sad one, with no hope of relief.” And she told him everything that had passed.

Arraeth looked at her and felt pity in the depths of his heart and said: “Indeed your tale is full of woe, a dolorous chant for the bards of Siluria. But indeed, lady, all hope is not lost, and your tragedy may yet become triumph.”

“What hope have I?” said Ishara.

“Cyrusius, the Great King, has sent word throughout all his realm. All magicians, wise men, seers, prophets, and scholars are commanded to present themselves before the Divine Throne, where the Great King shall pose a question to test their wisdom and grant a great boon to him whose answer is the best,” said Arraeth.

“What is the question?” said Ishara.

“What is the strongest?” said Arraeth.

“Alas!” cried Ishara. “I know not the answer, for I am no philosopher. It is hopeless! How shall I save my lord and husband from the gallows?”

“Despair not!” said Arraeth. “Is not truth on your side? Is not justice? If you perish in the desert, will not your husband surely die? You alone can aid him! Let us then travel to Sarthepolis. Your life is forfeit under the laws of the Great King, but we shall tell men that you are my niece.”

This plan seemed good to Ishara, for she had nowhere else to turn.

So Ishara and Arraeth traveled through many perils across the Great King’s realm. Near the ruins of Niveh, a group of Sarbian bandits waylaid them on the Great King’s highway, desiring to slay Arraeth and take Ishara as a concubine. But Arraeth threw back his cloak, and a cold light seemed to shine from him, and the bandits fled in terror. Ishara held Arraeth in awe, for birds and beasts served him, and he conversed with them in their own tongues. But he remained ever humble in demeanor and performed many small acts of kindness for those he met, and rumor spread of the wise man in the black cloak. And as they traveled, he taught her much of the Druid wisdom.

After many dangers, they came at last to great Sarthepolis, mistress of cities, a jewel in the desert. What words exist to describe its splendor? Can poets compose to its glory, or harpist play to its beauty, or singer sing to its strength? Lo, for its temples shone under the hot sun of Sarth, and its palaces gleamed, and great columns and statues lined its fair streets. And folk thronged there from all corners of the world to sell their goods: purple dye from the Daeolian Isles, grain from Maa-ut, jewels from the mountains of Callia, wool from Amariel, elephants from the plains of the Punjarab.

Now Ishara and Arraeth came unnoticed to Sarthepolis, for the whole world had heard the Great King’s challenge, and many men came to answer his question, dreaming of riches and glory. Mortuary priests from Maa-ut, magicians from Tarlith, sages of Old Shirzan, wild shamans from the heights of the Wasted Mountains, all came to pose their wisdom to the Great King.

Now Arraeth and Ishara came to the golden gates of the palace, and the guards challenged

them, saying: "Halt! Who dares come to approach the throne of the Lord of Sarth, Keeper of the Divine Flame, the Great King?" For many charlatans and tricksters sought to enter the Divine Court, seeking riches and fame.

"Behold!" cried Arraeth. "For I am Arraeth of Siluria of the order the men of your lands call the Druids, and I have come through many lands and perils to answer the question of the Great King."

The guards were amazed and said: "Indeed this is astonishing! For learned men have come from all parts of the Great King's realm, but you are the first to come from beyond his borders! Enter, honored sir, and may your wisdom illuminate the darkness."

Ishara and Arraeth came to the Divine Court and stood amongst the crowds. The Divine Court of the Great King stood on a circular floor of gleaming marble, beneath a dome of polished stone and gold. In the center of the room burned the Divine Flame of the Lord of Light, the sacred flame that has burned from the beginning of days and will burn unto the end of time. And behind the Divine Flame, on a throne of gems and gold, there sat the Great King, Cyrusius, clad in robes of purple, his crown, wrought gleaming crystal, his scepter, golden and ringed with gems, an image of divine splendor and power.

Then the chief herald stepped forward and said: "Hearken all! For the Great King has summoned wise men from all the world to test their wisdom. He desires to know: what is the strongest? Let those who would answer come forth!"

Then Khalifet of Maa-ut, the ancient priest, who could speak with the dead and knew much lore, stepped forward, and said: "Let me answer, if the Great King wills it."

"You may speak," said the herald.

"Great King, many things under the sun are strong," said Khalifet, "but what is stronger than wine? For does not wine madden all men? From the lowest to the highest, who can resist the power of wine? The slave toiling in the canals loses himself in its sparkling depths, and even you, oh Great King, even you can lose your reason to wine. For strong wine makes the cowardly man brave, and the brave man cowardly. The wisest man in the world becomes a fool when he drinks wine. Have not all men heard tales of drunken kings and princes, whose folly led them and their realms to destruction? Therefore, I say, wine is the strongest!"

This answer seemed good to many, and some despaired of answering.

But Abartorix of Callia stepped forward, an alchemist learned in the secret knowledge of the earth and precious metals. "Hear me, oh Great King," he cried, "if you will."

"You may speak," said the herald.

"Wine indeed is strong," said Abartorix, "but are not you stronger, oh Great King? Do you not rule all the lands of civilized men? Is not your word law, your wish an unbreakable command? For men slay each other at your command. You tell one man 'live', and he lives, and you tell another one 'die', and he dies. Do not men give of their treasure to you, and fear your wrath if they cannot pay? Can you not take the most beautiful women of the land as your wives and concubines, whomever you wish? Therefore, I say, the Great King is the strongest!"

This answer seemed good, and even the Great King seemed pleased, and most despaired of answering.

But Marduk and Erashur of Tarlith stepped forward. "Hear us," they cried, "oh Great King, if it is your will."

"The Great King is pleased to allow his friends Mardak and Erashur to speak," said the herald, "for they revealed the treachery of the false and faithless Darian."

At this Ishara would have cried aloud, but Arraeth placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Stay a moment," he said, "for the time is nigh."

"Great King, wine is surely strong," said Mardak and Erashur, "and you indeed are the mightiest of men. But are not women stronger? For a man may refuse wine, but still a woman may fill his mind with desire, bewitch his senses, and torment him with lust. For women are crafty creatures, base and cunning, and know well a man's weakness. Veiled eyes, a crafty smile, a glimpse of flesh, do not all these things drive men mad with desire? Every man, from the basest to the highest, knows well the torments of lust and the power of a woman. Even you, oh Great King! For do you not have wives and concubines to fill your bed? And are they not clad in jewels and silks and attended by maidservants and possess all the delights of a woman's childish heart? Do you not build them palaces and give them gifts? For you are their master, Great King, but they have mastered you, for you give them all that they desire. Truly, then, women are the strongest!"

This answer seemed good to many, and though it stung the Great King to wrath, he knew that Mardak and Erashur spoke truly, for indeed he had many wives and concubines, and it pleased him to indulge them. And Mardak and Erashur felt joy in their hearts, hoping that the Great King would grant them a boon and dreaming of the wealth they would obtain.

"Will anyone else come forward?" cried the herald. "Will anyone else pose his wisdom to the Great King?"

"I shall speak, my lord!" said Arraeth, stepping before the Divine Throne, Ishara at his side. The Great King and all the court gazed at Arraeth in wonder, for the gathered wise men wore silks and jewels and colored robes, but Arraeth was clad all in black and seemed a grim raven amongst peacocks. And Mardak and Erashur saw Ishara, and were amazed, for they had thought her dead in the wastes of the Sarbian Desert.

The Great King himself stood and lifted his scepter and said: "Truly, stranger, my eyes perceive that you have come from afar. For you do not appear as any of my subjects nor as any of the peoples under my rule."

"I am Arraeth, noble lord, of Siluria, of the order some men of your dominions call the Druids," said Arraeth. "I have traveled through many perils to answer your riddle, Great King."

"Treachery!" cried Mardak and Erashur. "See, oh Great King! Is that not Ishara, wife of the traitorous dog Darian? Let her be put to the noose at once, for surely she took part in her husband's treachery!"

"The Great King may do as he wishes," said Arraeth. "But it would be a great waste, for she is my answer to the Great King's riddle."

"You may speak," said the Great King.

"Truly, Great King, wine is strong, and women, and you are mightiest of the mortal rulers of this age," said Arraeth. "But something is yet stronger, mightier than the hands of man and woman, stronger than anything made by their craft and skill."

"What could be so strong?" said the Great King.

"Truth, my lord! Truth is strongest. For do not malefactors fear the truth? Do not wicked men hide their crimes, fearing that truth shall uncover them? Does not the thief work in shadow? Does not the murderer lie to save his neck? Do not all men fear the truth, hiding from it, shunning it? And why should they not? See, my lord, how the truth shatters falsehood, how it breaks deceit like an empty shell, how lies crumble like dry bricks beneath the truth. For see, my lord, this woman beside me, and she shall show you how truth is strongest of all! Come, Ishara! Show the strength of truth!"

And Ishara knew what she must do and knelt before the Divine Throne, and said: "Oh,

Great King, your humble servant begs leave to speak. For my husband has been condemned as a traitor, yet I am not worthy to wash your sandals with my tongue."

"You may speak," said the Great King, "for the laws of our fathers command that all may speak in their defense, and Arraeth of Siluria has made me curious. How, then, is truth the strongest?"

"My husband has been falsely accused!" cried Ishara. "For those men, Mardak and Erashur of Tarlith, often spied upon me as I bathed and conceived an evil lust for me and begged me to lie with them. I refused, and they forged treasonous letters against my husband for their revenge."

"Lies!" said Mardak. "Believe not this impudent whore!"

"Slander!" said Erashur. "This harlot seeks to beguile us with deceiving words!"

"These are grave charges," said the Great King. "How can you prove them?"

Then Ishara remembered the Druid wisdom Arraeth had taught her and said: "Bring me a bar of clay, at once!"

One of the Great King's servants did as she bid, and she took the bar of clay and shaped it into four small balls.

"What is this meaning of this folly?" said Erashur.

"Come here," said Ishara. "Are you afraid? What have you to fear from me, a mere woman? Were you not so anxious to lay hands on me?" Erashur came to her, and she thrust the balls of clay into his ears. "Now, Mardak, hear my words! You found this treasonous letter. How then did it come to you?"

"We found it," said Mardak, "alongside the road, after your husband rudely thrust us from Shalifane."

"Indeed?" said Ishara. She put the remaining balls of clay into Mardak's ears and removed the clay from Erashur's ears. "Now, Erashur, tell me. Where did you find this treasonous letter?"

"We purchased it from a Daeolian," said Erashur, "one of Darian's accomplices, for twenty coins of silver."

"See!" cried Ishara. "Their accounts do not match. Surely, I say, the letter is a fabrication, made with their crafty minds."

"Alas!" said the Great King, his wrath kindled, "for I have been deceived!"

Then Mardak and Erashur, seeing that their plans were undone and their doom at hand, cried aloud in fear. But they drew themselves up and gathered their powers and began working a charm of death.

"You have destroyed us!" they said. "But we shall take you with us in death, harlot, and long shall men tremble at memory of your fate!" And it seemed a shadow of death gathered around them, and men fled from them, and Ishara could not escape.

But Arraeth stepped forward and yelled: "See, then, magicians of Tarlith, see how truth is stronger than any of your arts! See me in truth!" And he flung back his cloak, and white light filled the Divine Court. Mardak and Erashur screamed, covering their eyes. No one knows what they saw, for no man has ever seen a Druid in his fury and lived. Mardak and Erashur screamed and fell to their knees, for the light had blinded them and shattered their powers like glass. Arraeth closed his cloak, and the light vanished, and Ishara and the Great King and all the court stared at in him in awe.

And they knelt before him as one, and the Great King said: "Truly, wise one, yours is but a garment, for you surely are the Lord of Light himself!"

"Nay!" said Arraeth. "Stand, all of you! Nay, I am but a mortal man, though one weary with much responsibility. But now, Great King, do you not have the answer to your riddle? Is not truth the strongest?"

The Great King rose and said: "Surely, truth is mighty and strongest of all! And you, wisest of all sages, you have answered well. What boon would you ask of me? Ask, and I shall grant, even if it be up to half my kingdom."

"What need have I for baubles or lands or titles and thrones? I ask only this," said Arraeth. "Restore Darian's name, declare him innocent of all charges, and proclaim him your friend once more. For he is a worthy man."

"That I would have done, had you not even asked," said the Great King. "You will ask for nothing? Truly, then, Arraeth of Siluria, you are the wisest of men."

"Nay, great lord," said Arraeth, "for I am but a servant."

The Great King gave orders, and Darian was fetched from the dungeons and reunited with Ishara, and the Great King embraced him and set his signet ring on Darian's finger and proclaimed him a loyal friend and valiant subject. But the guards stripped Mardak and Erashur of their garments and drove them with barbed whips through the streets of Sarthepolis until they came to the Gallows Gate. And there at the Gate they hung from a gallows a hundred feet tall, and their bodies swung in the wind.

Now the Great King proclaimed Darian his vizier and the second man in the kingdom and set him over all the satraps and officials. Darian ruled wisely, and the realm of the Sarthians grew ever larger and stronger, and all the peoples of the world bowed before the wisdom of the Divine Throne. In those days, men began to name the Great King, Cyrusius the Great, and long his memory endured.

As for Ishara, she became a great matron, with many children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and all the peoples of the Sarthian Kingdom held her in reverence. For she had learned much of the Druid wisdom and could shrewdly judge the hearts of men, and her husband relied on her counsel in all that he did.

Yet often, in the midst of her splendor, Ishara would wonder after Arraeth. For he left soon after the death of Mardak and Erashur, for he had many other duties, and he was never seen in Sarthepolis again. Yet the memory of the wise Druid became legend, for travelers still say that a man may glimpse, from time to time, a figure all in black robes, striding alone through the desert.

The End

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I discovered afterward that following my fight with the giant gargoyle, throughout the battlefield the other gargoyles froze—some rampant and others dropping out of the sky—as though the enemy commander's puissance gave them life and his death hardened all of them into stone. Leaderless, the rest of the beasts quickly succumbed, and Enion's troops cut them down until not one remained alive. Afterwards, soldiers went through the enemy camp, smashing the gargoyles into rubble.

Our army started back to Enion, but not before we left a third of our force buried in that narrow valley. I heard someone name it, appropriately, the Battle of Stones, for we used the smashed gargoyles to make cairns for our fallen.

I rode solo for most of the trip, glad for the peace and a chance to ruminate on what had happened in the last few days. I pulled my pipe from its belt loop, packed it with ganja and brought it to flame. I waited for the cannabis to stimulate my neuronal network and set the trillions of connections between synapses to clarifying the information I recently acquired.

I was Merlin's twin, and the gargoyle leader should have at least been startled by a man with the appearance of his master. But I had seen no hint of recognition or surprise in its stony eyes. Certainly Graymalkin's premise that my brother plotted the attacks on Enion now seemed questionable. And Morgan's conjectures were equally suspect. In fact, when I reviewed their stories a second time, neither one jibed entirely with the other, except on the point of Merlin's complicity in their personal situations. Earlier, I passed off inconsistencies as related to the same behavior that makes eyewitnesses poor testifiers: most people are inherently lousy observers. But now I was no longer so certain. The suspicious part of me said that the other players in this game had stacked the deck, but whether merely in their favor or decidedly against me, I had no idea. Chaos surrounded me from the Umbra's unseen borders to the wreckage of my memories, making the past, present and future like minefields, for which I possessed no map to guide me. Graymalkin and Morgan could be taking advantage of my ignorance. I decided then that I must find a way to have Artemis take me to the cave. Operating blind on my own like this, I could not trust the information I received from my father or my niece, if that's who they truly were. I needed the Ixtlan Shuttle on the chance that it could repair my mind and restore my memory. At that moment, the snippet of Peer's and Della's conversation sounded like a clarion in my mind, clamoring to be heard over the rest of my reflections. They liked Lord Qweg as he was now. The thought occurred to me that reversing the amnesia maybe wasn't such a good thing after all.

On that point, my pipe went out. The pain and weariness of my body would take my thoughts no further. I knocked the ash from the bowl and returned the pipe to my belt.

I watched the scenery pass by me. The horses plodded along, matching the troops' tiredness. We entered a wide glade where the Til River splashed noisily on the way to Enion. Giant smokewood trees along the bank carved a dome of interlaced branches above us. We stopped to water the horses and rest the company.

Peer rode toward me, his wild black hair flowing like a spectral nimbus around him. Blood splotched his clothes. He saw me staring at the marks of battle.

"The blood isn't mine," he said smugly.

"How fortunate for you." I winced, feeling the pain in my ribs and my other wounds.

He grinned.

"You need to practice more. Then you wouldn't get hurt."

"That's not the only reason. I'm also getting too old to fight like this."

"Staying young would help too," he agreed. He swiveled in his saddle and gazed at the clearing. "Do you remember this glade?"

I didn't know if I should or not, and I was too tired to finesse the knowledge from him.

"No."

He nodded.

"I don't think you and I ever hunted here. But I know this place and it is very strange to me."

He paused. Light reflecting from the Til River rippled across his chiseled face. He drew the corners of his mouth down and his eyes narrowed. He seemed to be waiting for something. I had no idea what, so I waited too. After a few moments he shrugged and went on.

"Queen Adella and I found the queer, little weaver, Graymalkin, near these trees beside the river."

My weariness went away very quickly.

"Curious that you bring this up now. I met him."

Peer looked surprised, which is to say that he was surprised, because he was honest in all things, and his bewilderment meant he did not know anything of my perambulations the other night.

"When?"

"The night before last, in my weaving room."

Peer grunted but otherwise remained silent.

"I am surprised that neither you nor Adella mentioned him or that she allowed him into my private chamber," I added.

A curious smile pulled at the corners of his generous mouth.

"Does her decision displease you?"

I shook my head.

"No. Enion is her realm and the palace and what goes on within it is her prerogative."

Peer's smile faded and he looked a little perplexed, maybe even a bit doubtful.

He said slowly, "Someday, when this war is over, you will have to tell me what you have done with the real Lord Qweg."

I groaned inwardly. Perhaps the ganja left me somewhat light-headed, or the wounds from the battle dulled my wits, but I neglected the fact that I most likely should have been furious at Della's presumption**.** Probably the old Qweg would have vented his rage by hurling a few objects around the clearing. But I didn't feel like doing that. My fury was contained. No, not that exactly. More like directed toward Merlin's injustices and filling me with a sense of righteousness instead of pettiness. Still, I couldn't let Peer's observation pass unchallenged, so I groused, "I suppose you would feel better if I ranted at her orders?"

"T'would be more natural," he answered readily.

I considered this statement and how I should respond. Since I did not want to tell him about my amnesia, I scowled and answered coolly, "A lot can happen in two years to change a man's perspective."

For several eye blinks he regarded me steadily with those coal-dark eyes of his. At last he nodded his huge head slowly, dropping the matter.

I kept my voice even and said, "Now, you were saying that you found Graymalkin here in Mistelwood."

"Yes. Nightriders had waylaid him. They stole everything—even his clothes—except for a tapestry and left him for dead. We carried him to the palace and nursed him back to health. He's been there ever since."

"When was this?"

"Just after you disappeared two years ago."

"And the tapestry . . . what did it portray?"

"He would not let us see it."

I splashed water on my face and took a deep draw from my canteen. I considered Peer's revelation. Graymalkin told me that when he arrived, I was absent from Enion. Later I returned long enough to plan a strategy to recover the Shuttle. Given my feelings for Della, I could not imagine visiting Enion for any length of time, no matter how short, and not seeing her.

"Perhaps you are mistaken about the timing," I said.

He shook his head.

If Peer could not remember a thing clearly, he would say so. Which meant Graymalkin's story was a fabrication. I also found, as I worked through my speculations, that this twisting tide of events did not really surprise me any. I supposed all along I thought it too good to be true that a person who could tell me about my past would show up on the proverbial doorstep.

"So, why was this encounter with Graymalkin strange to you?" I asked.

"Because it seems like I have always known him, and yet, the first time I remember meeting him was in this glade in Mistelwood."

"Why're you telling me this?"

"Because I recently wondered if your absence related to his sudden appearance?"

A soldier passed by then and handed us pieces of a dark rye bread, flattened and sprinkled with fennel and olive oil. I chewed mine slowly, giving myself time to think about Peer's statement. It was a good question and I would pay a lot to know the answer.

When I finished eating, I said, "I don't know," which was the truth because I could not remember. I did not tell Peer this, of course, but repeated the story I recounted at Macbeth's home on Thereon. "I left Enion two years ago when I heard rumors that someone intended to harm her. I was ambushed and kept prisoner for most of that time. I escaped when they tried to sell me into slavery. I suppose my disappearance and Graymalkin's arrival could be related."

Peer's face remained set and I knew my reply did not assuage him.

"I'll ask him about it and let you know what I find out," I said.

This seemed to satisfy him.

But as intriguing as Graymalkin's appearance might be to Peer, I was more concerned by the Ixtlan Shuttle and Graymalkin's craving to find it. The answers to all my riddles were mixed up with this device. This idea wasn't wishful thinking, though wishes were high on the list and not to be discounted. My reasoning had to do more with my attunement to the Shuttle, and the fact that the more I thought about the matter, the more I realized Graymalkin, while pushing hard for me to retrieve it, never really explained his motives. If he were my father and a Shadow Weaver like me, he could have looked for it himself. I decided that the next time I traded information with Graymalkin, I would press him harder for his side of things.

Peer and I finished watering the horses and started on our way with the rest of the army.

I was alone again for a while, but late in the afternoon, when the sun-gleamed towers of Enion came into view, Adella urged her horse beside mine.

"Your heroics saved Enion," she said.

"It was the sun," I demurred. "The gargoyles turned to stone in daylight."

"Peer says differently. While you fought the leader, the other ones were confused. In those moments we rallied and gained the upper hand."

I shrugged.

"I think too much is being made of my actions."

"Maybe. Still, you risked your life like you said you would."

"Everyone of our company risked their lives this day."

Her brow furrowed and a questioning smile played about her lips.

"How uncharacteristically chivalrous of you."

"There was chivalry enough to go around. Too many of our soldiers gave their lives for Enion." I changed the subject. "Where is Artemis?"

"She and the Vale Foresters vanished into the fastness of Tirach Mir to bury their dead."

I hid my disappointment. I had hoped for her to tell me her decision about the cave before she left.

"Did she say when she would return?"

Della shook her head. She hesitated for a moment, then added, "She did give me a message for you. 'Tell father that I will wait for him at Barnath Lake. When he is ready, he should come find me; we will visit the place we talked about.'"

I didn't respond. The way my body ached at that moment, I might be ready after a year of sleep. But I had made up my mind that as soon as I rested sufficiently that my wounds recovered somewhat, I was riding into Tirach Mir alone to find my daughter and the gate.

"You're going to the cave," Della said, as though reading my thoughts.

"She told you about that?" I asked.

She nodded.

"After the battle Artemis showed me the crescent moon beside her eye. Our daughter is marked like you now."

"Not like me."

"I'm not so sure. In the last two years she has cursed you often and called you much less flattering names than father. Now I believe she would go with you if you asked her."

"Then I won't ask her. Besides, she's already decided to remain here, until the fighting is ended."

"But you'll leave. I know you will!" she cried shrilly.

At that moment, I felt a strong urge to tell Della everything—my amnesia, the Ixtlan Shuttle, my brother Merlin—but I forced the impulse away. I still could not bring myself to trust anyone with my disability. Instead I said, "I want to stay. I want to be your consort. And if I can return, I will. But I don't know what will happen when I find that cave and I must find it."

"Why? You already risked your life enough."

"I believe it holds Enion's only hope."

She turned away, but not before I saw something sparkle beneath her left eye.

"It will kill you," she murmured.

"You have second sight now?" I asked lightly.

She turned back and the sparkle was gone, but the star flashed angrily.

"I don't need it to know that cave will take you away again . . . maybe forever this time."

I reached out and brushed my hand against her cheek. My fingertips came away wet.

"Perhaps, but if that happens, I swear to you that I will take the person responsible for these attacks with me, and at least Enion will be safe."

Her head shook slowly as if she could not quite believe what she was hearing.

"You've always cared for Enion, but like a child's toy or a new bauble at New Year's festival. Now you sound like her protection is your..."

"Obligation?" I finished for her.

"I was going to say duty."

I shrugged.

"Duty . . . obligation; it's really about honor. Men and women gave their lives defending Enion today. Should I do any less?"

She set her lips.

"Damn you!" she hissed through clenched teeth. "Why didn't you stay away!"

She spurred her mount forward and I let her go, deciding against the advice that when a woman runs away, it does not necessarily mean she doesn't want to be followed. I didn't go after her because in that moment I *would* tell her everything, and I could not risk the possibility she would insist on coming along. I couldn't bear to put her in more danger because of me.

So I gazed at the spidery beauty of Enion as though seeing the palace for the first and last time. I gave myself to the luminous silver and gold hues flowing like liquid mercury along turreted spires and scalloped walls. I listened to the soft sounds of evening fashion a song of its spectral beauty. For a very long while, I didn't think of anything.

When I came back to myself, my resolution to keep my secrets was whole again. Della rode only a little ways ahead of me. I caught up with her and angled close enough that our stirrups touched. She did not shy away.

"I have to do this," I said quietly.

She laughed sharply.

"That's what you always say."

"Even so, it's true. Merlin Skye desires Enion. He will keep sending armies against her until I stop him."

"Merlin!" She slammed a clenched fist against her thigh so hard her horse nickered. She calmed and asked, "And the cave can do that?"

"I believe something connected with it can."

"You'll go no matter what I want."

"I'll go because I made a promise to you."

"I could release you from your promise."

"Please don't."

She stared at me for a short while and something like understanding flashed through her features.

"You are not the Qweg who left Enion two years ago."

"Everyone changes. Even so, I would like to think I am a better man than then."

"I still hate you."

I grinned.

"Love . . . hate, it's all the same. At least you care enough to feel something for me."

She blushed, flustered at my words.

I took her hand in mine and filled the silence before she could say anything. "Della, I want to keep my word. I believe it is the most decent thing I have ever done." I kissed her fingers lightly and let them go as I urged my mount forward, not wanting to give her a chance to make too much out of what I had just said.

"Return safely," she whispered after me.

Chapter Fourteen

I arrived at my rooms late—tired, hungry and dirty—after making certain Enion's soldiers were cared for.

The army returned to the palace just after sundown. The night sky welcomed us as heroes, bombarding the heavens with a cosmic fireworks display of lavender and saffron aurora, laced with shooting stars. I spent the next five hours helping settle the horses and arranging compensation for the families of the sons and daughters killed in action. The kitchens prepared a feast. I did not eat, but asked a drudge to fetch me a lute. I walked among the soldiers, plucking the strings lightly. I started with 'Two Ravens' and then played 'The Battle of the Stones.' The melody had found its way into my head before we left the valley. The words came later, as we journeyed home, and I fashioned them into a ballad. Someone produced a flute and played an eerie descant on the refrain. When I finished, there was a vast amount of weeping and unburdening of hearts. Later, everyone went to their barracks and I went to my rooms.

I bathed, ate and slept. Fourteen hours later I woke, ate and slept again. And dreamed again of Tintagel and the Shadowloom.

The Enion tapestry hung on the loom, a living picture. I smelled the salt tang of the sea, heard the hunting cries of kestrels. Shadowy Mistelwood and brooding Tirach Mir loomed forbiddingly over the palace, which glowed luminously under the amber sun.

Once more I approached the tapestry, never taking my eyes from the west tower where Adella stood. The gigantic Peer towered like a mountain on her left. Artemis, with her mother's jeweled hair, waited stoically behind them. I reached out and touched Adella's fingers. The smooth nap of the weaving felt cold at first. Then slowly her hand grew warm like living flesh. The tapestry became spongy; my hand sank into it. She smiled and I stepped forward to embrace her.

And I saw the Yellow Dwarf.

Graymalkin grinned up at me. He put out a hand and stopped me.

"It's been a long time," he said.

"Get out of my way. I want to come home."

"You can't."

"Enion belongs to me!" I yelled.

He giggled.

"Without the Ixtlan Shuttle, you can never come home."

I appealed to Adella.

"Tell him to let me pass. Enion is mine."

She turned cold and unmoving as an ice sculpture. Peer and Artemis were equally frozen.

Graymalkin picked me up and tossed me aside like a bag of crisp autumn leaves. He took the tapestry down from the loom and spread it across the floor.

"The tapestry belongs to me now," he said.

He grabbed up one corner.

"No!" I cried.

I lunged to stop him, but he shoved me aside. My head struck the flagstones, stunning me. Graymalkin dove into Mistelwood, the tapestry clenched in his fist. Enion folded into itself and disappeared with a pop.

The incubus faded away into blackness and I wakened quickly. Moonlight, through the

room's jewel-pane windows, washed over my bed in fractured hues. I was shaking from the images that had just passed through my sleep.

I didn't put much faith in dream analysis, Freud making even less of an impression on me than Jung did. I tend to think along practical and direct lines of problem solving. But with my mind injured, perhaps nightmares were all I had to help guide me through reality.

Try as I might, however, I could not grasp what this dream meant. So, I closed my eyes and sought refuge in sleep, but it did not return. I discovered pleasantly that I was rested for the first time in days. I got up and stretched. My ribs were still sore, but I could breathe deeply without pain. New pink flesh indicated well-healed wounds. Now was as good a time as any to seek out Artemis and the cave. Barnath Lake was deep into Tirach Mir, two days of riding. Della and I had already exchanged good-byes.

So, I dressed quickly, buckling on Thruvir and throwing a dark blue riding cloak over my shoulders. I passed by the rug, glowing eerily as though a jewelled mist floated over it. Something about these remnants of weavings called to me— maybe its tattered nature simply reflected my own past— but it would have to wait until I returned. The necessity of finding the Shuttle pressed upon me more. I went out onto the terraces and sought a backstair and gate that led to the stables. As I hurried along the battlements under the bright moon, argent threads in the cloak glittered like tiny streams of silver ore.

An old guard at the latticed gate let me through. He smoked a black briar pipe that laced the air with a pungent aroma of burley.

"Good morning, Lord Qweg," he said.

"How goes the watch?" I asked.

He removed a chewed pipestem from his mouth and answered in a voice with a rasp of fog in it.

"Quiet as a stone, Sir. Only the gentle wisp of moonbeams brushing the walk."

"You have a touch of the bard."

He smiled, crooked teeth in a seamed face.

"The night brings on poetry and dreams. A man could see through the morrow on a still eve like this and find the answers to a great many questions of eternity."

I chuckled.

"You should write those down."

"Oh, I do. I save them for a year, and in the fall, I set them adrift in the Til River and watch them sink out of sight into another world."

I stopped with my foot above the top step. A notion gnawed at me. I turned back.

"Thanks," I said to the guard. "I find I'm not going riding after all."

The old watchman nodded.

I returned to the palace and walked down the central stairs with a sense of anticipation that I could not keep out of my step. My mind raced with all the bits and pieces of that fractal pattern, which had bothered me several nights earlier. A few of them fell into place. I suppose I should have seen through what Graymalkin was doing. My excuse was that the promise of restored memories and the battle with the beast army preoccupied me. I crossed the dining room into the dimly lit hall. The guards at the far end came to attention and quickly stepped aside as I approached. I opened the door and handed my key to the astonished guard.

"Find Peer and give this to him; tell him I said to come here and to maintain a constant guard on Graymalkin."

I didn't wait for the door to shut behind me, but descended quickly into the first turning

of the stair. I followed its twisting way in the gloom, the muffled sounds of my passage like rapid footfalls in a cave. I swiftly reached the bottom. The orange-red glow at the end of the darkened corridor beckoned.

I crossed to it and soon stood in the weaving room. I expected to see Graymalkin, but the hunchbacked, Yellow Dwarf was absent. I did not think his disappearance would last long with what I planned next.

The Earth Tapestry stretched vibrantly alive on the loom. The weaving seemed to call to me. I felt the same overwhelming desire to walk into it that I experienced with the Enion arras at Macbeth's house on Thereon in what now seemed a lifetime ago. I went over and brushed my hand against the weave. This time an icy wind blew across my fingertips. I pressed my hand firmly against the nap, which became warm and yielding. I watched my fingers sink into the picture and Tintagel begin to waver like a mirage on a hot desert landscape. The air smelled of burned fuel; my eyes began to water. I pushed harder. My forearm, up to my elbow, disappeared into the fabric. By now I could hear the sound of horns and motors, and I recognized them as coming from cars and trucks—more images from another world I remembered only in bits and pieces. My fingers skimmed Tintagel's rough black stone. One step and I would be on the castle's ruined battlements.

"Stop!" bellowed Graymalkin behind me.

I jerked my hand back. The weaving stopped shimmering and once more turned icy. The room smelled of wood smoke and I heard only the sound of the crackling fire on the hearth.

I spun around as Graymalkin separated from the shadows of the stair. He looked scared, like a man who saw his only chance at survival about to disappear.

"Don't . . . don't," he said. His breathing heaved like a man in distress. "Merlin will destroy you."

I kept my face neutral.

"All right, I won't."

He shuffled toward me. He was dressed in the same ochre-colored, metal tunic and yellow leather pants as before. His face was flushed and his gray-blue eyes darted anxiously from me to the tapestry.

I stared down at his humped figure. "I won't go to Tintagel in exchange for your showing me the Enion Tapestry."

He squeaked but said nothing.

"I need the Tapestry and if you don't help me now, Gareth will never see himself again as the beautiful young man he was when he lived on Earth at Tintagel."

Graymalkin winced, and then his face brightened in surprise. He stood as straight as his hunched frame allowed, and his eyes shone keen and penetrating. I wondered how much of his behavior the last time we met was posturing and how much was the mercurial temperament imparted by Merlin's touch when weaving him in the form of a dwarf. Not that either really mattered; I realized I could no longer treat him like a simpering old man.

"You've remembered more than I expected," he said shrewdly.

"Memories lodge in all sorts of places in the human brain," I answered. "With all that's happened to me in the last seventy-two hours, I've been able to string enough impressions together to figure out you aren't my father."

I expected him to sputter a denial, but he merely shrugged and pulled at the end of his large nose. He clambered onto the stool in front of the loom.

"You were bound to discover that sooner or later. Just out of curiosity, how did you find out

about the Enion Tapestry and my part in its rescue?"

"Merlin doesn't have it, otherwise he would have done to this world what you did to his."

"And how did that lead you to my real identity?"

"I spoke with Peer. He told me about finding you injured in Mistelwood with a tapestry you were overly fond of and wouldn't let any one see. A little while later, I figured out your tale of being cast into the Umbra by Merlin had to be a lie. Morgan and Macbeth were trapped on Thereon and that left only Gareth in a position to steal the tapestry. It's how you escaped Merlin—you dove into the weaving while holding on to one edge. The tapestry folded in upon itself and you ended up here where Merlin's magic changed you into the dwarf, Graymalkin."

He cackled. "You're a lot shrewder than I gave you credit for."

"It's nice to be appreciated," I said dryly.

"So, what happens next?" he asked.

"You answer some questions as Gareth."

He cringed.

"Graymalkin, please!" he shouted, then settled down. "What kind of questions? Even though I am one of Merlin's children, I really don't know very much."

Another bit of fractal fell into place and more of the pattern emerged.

"How long have you been working with Morgan and Macbeth?"

His cheeks puffed out and his voice became shrill. "You seem to have figured all of this out."

"The essentials, at any rate. Some of what has happened still isn't clear. For instance, why do you insist on calling yourself Graymalkin when your name is Gareth?"

A grimace contorted his face.

"I can't say," he whined.

I frowned and my hand shifted to Thruvir. "Gareth, we aren't going to have a long and beautiful relationship if you aren't more forthcoming."

His cheeks grew bright orange. A nervous tic started in his eye and spread to his face. Soon his whole body twitched as if in an epileptic seizure. With a great effort, he controlled himself.

"I mean I don't like to say the name!" he gasped. "Merlin wove something into the Enion Tapestry that sends pain throughout my body whenever I utter my real name. I have to be very determined or it drives me crazy."

I nodded, remembering how he had nearly collapsed the night we met when he said the name.

"How much of your personality is a result of Merlin's weaving?"

"Most of it, especially the physical manifestations." He cackled, once more in character. "It takes all of my concentration and effort to act normal for even a short period of time."

"Can you tell me how the tapestry weaving works?"

"Not really, I only saw my father at it the one time and our situation did not allow for much exchange of knowledge." He tittered at his own wit and several seconds passed before he calmed down enough to speak further. "But the two of you shared the Ixtlan Shuttle, creating worlds for your amusement. That is, until you made Enion."

He stopped while I retrieved one of the chairs from beside the fireplace. It was fabric and wood and ornately carved. I made myself comfortable.

"Start at the beginning and tell me everything that happened," I said.

His brow furrowed.

"And if I refuse?"

"I leave and send in Peer to escort you to the palace's dungeon, where you'll find the accommodations much less comfortable than these chambers."

He frowned, his eyes taking in all of me in an unsettling gaze, as though he knew something about me I could not know myself.

"Why not?" he said, forcing his voice to a more human-like quality.

Chapter Fifteen

The essence of the human condition can be distilled into what people have and what they desire, Graymalkin began. People fight to hold tightly to whatever they have and for whatever they desire—sometimes, especially sometimes, when they can make someone else suffer in gaining it.

You and Merlin weren't really any different. You knew what you had and went after what you desired. As twin brothers, though, your intertwined lives were a bit more complicated. You thought alike and worked alike; you shared power over the Umbra through the Shadowloom and the Ixtlan Shuttle. You created worlds of your liking and design.

I suppose that was where your twinship parted, however. Though both of you were arrogant and jaded, Merlin was more cruel, his worlds more savage. As you saw your brother sink more deeply into barbarism, your visits to Tintagel became less and less frequent. Finally you only visited when it was time to transfer the Shuttle.

Then you created Enion . . . lustrous, fair, pure . . . the antithesis of everything that Merlin ever conceived. It sat at the lip of the Umbra, a pearl surrounded by a shell of chaos. It might have gone unnoted except that you made one mistake, a tiny flaw really. You made Queen Adella its ruler.

Merlin saw her and coveted her. But he was patient. He waited until his turn to wield the Ixtlan Shuttle. He ambushed you and stole the Enion Tapestry. You must have escaped his trap. He probably reckoned, since he controlled the weaving tool, that you could not move against him. He was right, too, at least up to a point. He held all the cards and could afford to wait until a time when he could remove you permanently and take over your life as Lord Qweg.

But he didn't reckon on my interference, which I suppose started when he created the Brittania Tower and placed Tintagel Castle at its peak.

The Brittania Tower rose out of London's East End slums, a slender minaret nearly two thousand feet high. The world's tallest office building, it doubled as the home of Merlin Skye, the twenty-first century's wealthiest industrialist. The Earth world's leading engineers said that the Tower could not be built, that the pinnacle of steel and glass and stone would topple, wrecking half of London. Merlin said that if that happened he would 'rebuild' the city. He would have too, better than the original, but it did not fall. Merlin had not become a Master Shadow Weaver through lack of ability or foresight.

When he completed the Tower, Merlin transported to London the remnants of stone that had been Tintagel Castle, legendary birthplace of King Arthur. He then 'resurrected' the castle atop the Brittania Tower, in exact detail, from foundation to loftiest spire, until it was restored to the way it had been in Uther Pendragon's time. The fabled fortress, once overlooking the Celtic

Sea from black rock cliffs in Cornwall, now rode majestically above London's smog and poor, above the noise and pestilence.

Growing up as the youngest son of Merlin Skye, I lived in the new Tintagel for twenty years, surrounded by its splendor of darkly polished wood and precisely mortised stone. It was a wonderful life in many respects. Dad wasn't around much and I had an exciting playground—a whole castle with coats of arms, armor and ancient weapons—in which to play. But as I grew older, I wondered where he disappeared to when he went into the bowels of Tintagel. He would emerge, days, sometimes even weeks later, refreshed as though he had been on some vacation. He would putter around the castle a few days, growing colder and more severe with the staff and his children, until it seemed he was about kick us out. But then he removed himself. When I was twelve, Morgan and Macbeth swore they would find out what the secret of Tintagel's dungeon was. But they disappeared shortly after that. Eight years later, on my twentieth birthday, I contrived to follow Merlin the next time he disappeared into the bowels of Tintagel and uncover the secrets of his hidden lair.

That night, after the servants retired and Tintagel slept as silent as a graveyard, I left my room and waited in a gallery overlooking the castle's main hall. I did not wait long. Merlin appeared at midnight. He stopped momentarily below me and surveyed the area; he even looked up, but I ducked behind a suit of armor and escaped his gaze. Satisfied that he was alone, he left the main hall and passed through a seldom-used archway into a part of the castle only he was allowed to enter.

I had no time to waste, if I wished to follow him. I leapt from the gallery and silently caught the rim of a wagon wheel-sized chandelier that hung above the hall. Candles burned brightly in iron sockets. Hot wax hissed and splashed onto my fingers. I forced myself not to cry out. I continued my swing into a somersault, dropped noiselessly to the floor and stuck my landing. My gymnastic coaches would have been proud.

Ahead of me, Merlin proceeded along a hallway full of shadows and dust. At the far end he stopped before a huge oak door held up by massive iron hinges. Taking a key on a lanyard around his neck, he fitted it into the door's lock. The tumblers pulled back the self-locking bolt. The door opened silently on well-oiled, spring-loaded hinges and Merlin went through.

The door shut slowly behind him. I raced for it, and as the lockset eased by the jam, I slid the blade of my pocket knife between the locking bolt and the wood. The door whispered closed but did not latch.

I waited a decent interval, then pulled the door open a crack—the landing was empty—and slipped through. I descended a dimly lit, spiraling stair until I thought I might pass below the castle's foundations and into the Brittania Tower itself. At last I reached a darkened, narrow corridor. I heard Merlin's footsteps crossing a stone floor. Far ahead a glow pierced the gloom and Merlin disappeared into it. I hurried forward. At the light I found another stair, this one much shorter, which landed in an immense hall.

The source of the light blazed from a gigantic hearth casting a flickering orange-red glare into the room. Amid the light and shadow dwelled twenty tapestries, each one a three dimensional landscape of elaborate and vital detail. Some portrayed bizarre worlds that only spacefarers would ever know. Others captured scenes from Norse sagas or folk tales from the Brothers Grimm. All of them hung against Tintagel's walls of stone like open doorways into other universes.

The rest of the room was empty, save for a cliché of crossed rapiers above the fireplace, and in the room's center the Shadowloom which created these works.

Merlin had disappeared. He had not retraced his steps and yet I could not see him in the weaving hall. I felt terribly exposed on the upper landing, so I looked around and spied a cavity beside the stair large enough to hide my six foot frame. I swung over to it easily, using fingerholds in the mortised stone, and concealed myself where I could watch without being seen.

Once settled, I was drawn instantly back to the loom, for on it was the Enion tapestry. It was alive, a masterpiece of radiant beauty, more so than the others, which loomed like gates to hell compared to this one. But what took my breath away was the woman standing on the castle's tallest tower. It wasn't just her beauty that fascinated me, but something about her stance at the tower's edge, as though she stood defiantly against overwhelming odds, that made me want to occupy the space beside her.

Like Merlin, I fell in love with Queen Adella. I stared at her hopelessly. I don't know how much time passed. Still no sign of my father, and I began to fret earnestly. The only way out was up the stairs and past the hideaway I had appropriated. Then, a movement within the shadows of the tapestry. I blinked twice, hard, telling myself that it must have been a trick of the light. Merlin appeared suddenly in front of the loom as though he had just stepped out of the weaving. Tall and dark, he was dressed differently than when I followed him. He wore a mailed jerkin over dark green riding clothes. He had not shaved in at least a week. A battered satchel hung by a leather strap over his shoulder. His right hand grasped a rapier and his left hand gripped a strange looking device. He went to place the gadget on a shelf below the loom, stopped and stuck it in the satchel. Merlin looked up and stared at the woman on the tower. The corners of his full mouth curled lasciviously and I barely stifled a cry of jealous rage, as he touched two fingers to his lips and placed them on her cheek.

My envy changed instantly to alarm when Merlin jauntily saluted the tapestry and turned swiftly for the stairs. I barely had time to wedge myself fully into my hiding place. Merlin strode past me. Moments later his boots echoed faintly to silence in the corridor.

Holding my breath, I climbed onto the stair and quickly descended. At last I stood before the tapestry, awed by the intricate design and vibrant depth of the weaving. I sniffed; the air shimmered with the smell of seaweed and I fancied I heard the cries of distant sea birds. I could almost believe that Merlin had really stepped out of the loom.

I stared at the castle, especially the prominent crystal-white tower where the woman stood. I don't need to tell you how beautiful Queen Adella is. She's Enion's equivalent of Helen, Juliet and Cleopatra all in one. She held out one hand, the fingers partly cupped as though inviting the viewer to come to her.

I reached out and touched her fingers. They were icy at first. Then slowly her hand grew warm like living flesh. Astonished, I drew back and the warmth faded. I reached out again. The warmth returned a little more quickly this time. It grew stronger as I pressed my palm firmly against the fabric. At that moment I believed—such as dreams are made—that if I grasped that hand in mine, all I needed was to take a step and I would be standing next to her.

"No!" came a shout from above and behind me. Startled, I let go. The tapestry turned cold like the door to a freezer. I whirled and Merlin stood at the top of the stair. The malevolence in his eyes struck me like a blow and I staggered away from the loom.

Merlin hurtled down the staircase. Before I could move, a fist crashed into the side of my head and all my dreams went away and my world went black.

* * *

At last the glare and warmth of the hearth penetrated my stupor. I regained consciousness slowly, though the nightmare I had descended into stubbornly refused to relinquish its grip on me.

I hung naked, except for a loincloth. One end of a rope bound my wrists and the other looped around a ceiling timber. My feet dangled inches above the floor and I turned slowly in front of the hearth. I felt like a side of beef on a spit. Eventually my rotation brought me facing Merlin. He sat in front of the loom, his profile to me—dark face and long black hair tied back; black drooping mustachios covered his upper lip. By his right eye I recognized his crescent moon tattoo, silvery with a blue outline. It pulsed with a life of its own as he worked at his loom.

He threaded new yarn back and forth across the tapestry, the gossamer strands blending into the woof seamlessly. He wove quickly, concentrating intensely on his work. He did not even notice that I had come to. The fury with which he worked sent a chill down my spine. I strained to see what he wove, but the slow twist of the rope spun me away from the scene. I craned my head around the room for some means of escape and saw nothing that would help me. I must have made a noise, because when Merlin revolved back into view, he was staring in my direction. He grinned fiercely, revealing white teeth that stood out against the darkness of his face like polished pearls.

I couldn't think of anything witty to say so I called out, "Hello, Dad."

That seemed to rattle him and his smile vanished. He said, "Hello," and bent back to his task, ignoring me for the moment.

This was all right with me. At least he did not point out the obvious, that I had been caught trespassing. The sub-levels of the castle had been off limits to servants and everyone in the family; the weaving hall was never alluded to, only ghostly threats that no one should ever pass through the locked portal and descend into Tintagel's grottoes. Bodies buried? Paranoid delusions? No one knew, certainly not I, until now.

From the moment I saw the tapestries, I understood that his paranoia about this room had nothing to do with the eccentricity of an artist. And once I touched the fabric on the loom, I realized that Dad's tapestries opened doors into other realms. I could only imagine the wondrous and frightful things that existed in these fantasy worlds. I realized then that he guarded this room because it gave him a life far richer than Earth could provide.

I wondered briefly if I had the same ability to weave as Dad did. Then I whirled to the fire and the heat scorched the tender skin beneath my eyes and the thought fled.

I spun lazily to face Merlin again. He looked up again and said, "You'll be free soon enough. I'm almost finished here." He pointed to the arras. "Though I don't believe that you will be pleased with the result." His smile turned as cruel as I had always known it.

I can't say that I ever got along well with my dad. None of his kids did. Merlin was not a good parent—children being an unintentional and unwanted development of his liaisons. He largely neglected us except to berate us for our mistakes or tell us how stupid we were. There were three children growing up in the castle. My half brother Macbeth and his twin sister Morgan, twelve years older than I, left home many years before when I was still a young boy. I had the sense now that Merlin had made them vanish.

Dad laughed as though reading my thoughts. "I shouldn't be surprised at how easily you fell into my trap—dire warnings of 'here be dragons if you descend the darkened stair' are irresistible to anyone—but I am surprised. Macbeth and Morgan were just as gullible as you. I suppose that I hoped my children would be smarter than to fall for such a transparent deception."

The twist turned me away from him and I called out over my shoulder, "What happened to them?"

"I exiled them—Macbeth to Tharmis, a world of dark magic; and Morgan to the weaving beneath the windows, Thereon, a slave world."

"For how long?"

He laughed derisively. "Eternity...unless they learn how to construct a Shadowloom like this one. But even then they would need this." Merlin held up the device he had brought with him through the tapestry—a silver weaving shuttle about a foot long and shaped similarly to a shoe tree. Filmy threads flared out from one softly rounded end. The other tip was needle thin and smooth so that it slipped easily between the strands of the warp. I thought the precious metal should have dulled from the oils imparted by my father's hands, but the Shuttle gleamed as if on fire.

"Without it they could never weave the threads that create these worlds, nor travel safely from one world to another."

I shuddered. I had no desire to be imprisoned, especially in one of the more exotic and inhospitable-looking tapestries. Dad saw my fear and this pleased him. Then I realized that my father would never create something that did not have a bolt hole in case he somehow became trapped. Each weaving must have a means to return to Tintagel.

I said, "I don't believe that you would be so stupid as not to weave an escape from tapestry worlds in case it became necessary."

He frowned and I smiled, knowing I had guessed right.

"Not directly," he said slyly, noting my smugness. "Each tapestry world has a gate, but you have to know where the gate exists. And you have to pass through the Umbra, if you're brave enough, that connects all these tapestries. Hideous beasts and landscapes of pure chaos dwell in those shadowlands." He caressed the Shuttle. "Only this can take you directly and safely between tapestry worlds."

"So why this elaborate ruse to get me down here?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious? You are my son, the child of a master Shadow Weaver. You possess the ability, like myself, to travel from one tapestry world to another. I don't wish to share this craft with you . . . or your brother and sister. I don't want to take the chance that you will want this power all to yourself."

"You must think very little of us."

"On the contrary, I think a great deal of you. Like father, like children."

My mind recoiled at this possibility. I could not be like he was. Could I? But the hand of the woman had become warm flesh when I touched it, and if only I had had a little more time, I knew I would have stepped into the tapestry to join her. Or I would have stolen the tapestry, done anything to possess her.

I was more like my father than I cared to admit. This truth rocked me, and I had to face the fact that I had stolen into his sanctuary not out of some misbegotten sense of adventure. When I first gazed upon these tapestries, I wanted the mastery that had created them. In my heart, I wanted, no, demanded, the skill he kept locked away. This weaving talent was an innate part of me as well, a gift of his genes, and I had come here to steal it.

He returned to his work. Several revolutions later, I saw him slide away from the loom. He sighed.

"Finished," he said. He indicated the tapestry. "You like this woman, don't you?"

I flushed.

He chuckled.

I rotated away from him. He rose and came over, stopping my twirling so that I faced him and the Shadowloom. “I think I will give you a chance to meet her. Of course, it won’t be the way you think.”

He made a motion to set me spinning again, thought better of it and walked back to the weaving. He removed a jeweled dagger from his waist. With a single fluid movement, he cut the strands holding the weaving at the bottom. I don’t know how he accomplished it, but the threads at the heddles let loose at the same time and the tapestry dropped out of the shadows into his arms. He made no sound as he collected its heavy folds. It took him a few minutes to lay the tapestry out upon the floor in such a manner that I could see it. The scene of mountain, forest, seaport and castle was the same except that now standing alongside the woman in the tower was a hunchbacked, yellow dwarf, with a pockmarked face partially hidden by a nicotine colored beard and an overly large nose.

“Graymalkin,” Merlin said, naming him. Dad’s eyes narrowed and he sneered, “You will come to know him very well.”

His taunt was not lost on me. Combined with the fire at my backside, I was sweating profusely.

His gaze shifted to the woman, and for a brief moment his face softened. “She is Queen Adella, who rules in Enion, a world much different than Earth. The people live much the same as their medieval counterparts in Britain lived one thousand years ago—a place of castles and caravels where combustion engines and explosives do not work.”

In spite of my predicament, I could not help but ask, “How is it possible to have a world where gunpowder will not explode or gasoline won’t vaporize and burn?”

“The weaver’s personality bestows its own influence on the loom. What he wills, appears. The different warps and wefts impart discrete laws of physics to the tapestry world. In turn, they become an island of stability in an otherwise chaotic universe. They are like Klein bottles, self contained, having no inside or outside, no beginning or end. That way they are unaffected by the uncontrolled realities of the shadowlands. The end result is that what works in one world does not necessarily work in another. For example, in Enion the only weapons that are useful are swords and similar arms, and mechanical devices like crossbows.”

He lost interest in explaining more and busied himself arranging the rest of the Enion Tapestry.

I worked, too. I had at last devised a means to escape. My weight combined with the spinning had stretched the rope and now my feet reached the floor. I am immensely strong and well coordinated—most likely another gift of my father’s genes, for I had seen him on occasion lift enormous objects with ease or juggle delicate objects to amuse guests. A succession of private coaches and trainers had tuned me like a fine athlete. I suppose that I could have won a gold medal in whatever Olympic venue I chose, but I had given up the idea of a sports career by the time I was sixteen. It would have been like an adult competing with children. At twenty, I was stronger than ever, and I knew that I would need all of that strength now, if I were going to succeed.

While Dad’s attention was on the weaving, I tested the rope. With the ground for leverage, I knew it would part with one good yank.

As Dad evened out the tapestry’s edges nearest me, I pulled with all my strength. The rope parted with a snap like a gunshot. At the same time, I threw my arms around him in a bear hug before he could turn and draw a weapon. I lifted him from the ground and squeezed. The breath

whooshed from his lungs.

He struggled wildly, but I held him so tightly that he could not breathe. His face grew red and I thought that he was going to pass out. But he slammed his head into the bridge of my nose. The bones smashed and my eyes watered. I let go and he rolled away. I heard him gasping while I brushed the tears from my eyes.

He drew his rapier and I rushed for one of the swords above the hearth. My wrists were still bound, so I had to grasp the rapier with both hands. I turned back to the room and he was on me. I barely parried his first thrust and it hissed along my shoulder, burning the skin. In his haste, he overextended and I closed with him briefly. I whirled him around and threw him away in the direction of the fire. He slammed against the hearth stones, but remained unsinged. His blade stayed between us and I could not attack.

The look in his eyes was murderous. I had studied fencing but was no expert swordsman. Dad had fenced daily for as long as I had known him. He came at me again, and I ran away, putting the loom between us to give me more breathing room. I flexed my shoulder. It hurt, but not excessively. A thin red line etched the skin but did not cut deeply. I was more worried about my wrists, which remained bound, and my nose, which bled profusely. Aside from the annoyance, the nosebleed meant my father could wear me down and eventually defeat me. I did not think he would kill me. He was too much of a devil for that. But whatever tortures he had planned for me earlier would now be doubled.

He circled the loom, trying to cut me off. I backpedaled ahead of him, always keeping the frame between us. I used this time to cut my bonds and free my hands. This action cost me a sliced ear when he lunged unexpectedly through the empty frame. From then on it was cut, thrust and parry, with Dad doing most of the cutting and thrusting. He used his weapon like an epee, striking at any target that appeared. His speed was dazzling, and only luck and the loom between us kept him from skewering me. Even so, within a few minutes I was cut in a half dozen places. My wounds blazed and I could feel myself slowing from the loss of blood.

He leaped suddenly through the loom, sweeping aside my thrust at his heart. He stripped my sword and collided with me. We collapsed to the ground. He tried to clinch me, but his hands slipped on my bloody chest. I managed to break away. He slashed at my head. I ducked. He feinted a lunge at my thigh. I skidded my legs out of the way but this maneuver left me overbalanced. He rushed me again before I could recover, slamming my body against the Shadowloom. The frame rocked violently, scattering the comb and the Shuttle onto the floor. He paused in his attack as he watched the silver weaving tool bounce onto the Enion Tapestry and disappear into it.

Merlin cried out. He dropped his rapier and released me. He would have dived after the Shuttle, but I pushed him at that moment with all my remaining strength. He staggered and fell, striking his head on the stone floor. He was stunned, but I did not finish him off.

I ran to the tapestry and scooped up the trailing edge. Summoning my desire, I thought only of the woman and the warm flesh of her hand gripping mine. I willed myself to join her and plunged into the weaving. Merlin bellowed at me to stop.

I dove into a cold ice sea. The arras became warm and I sank deeper into it. I glanced once upward through what appeared to be a watery surface. The weaving hall took on the flat quality of a painting. I continued to hold onto the Enion Tapestry and it followed me through, folding into itself.

I heard a muffled scream of horror. Then I was falling and for the second time that night, everything went black.

I heard voices, one of them soft and caring. A woman's voice. I kept my eyes closed, feigning insensibility.

"He is hurt badly," she was saying.

"Most likely well deserved, M'lady," the other replied. A man's voice. "He looks like a night rider. He probably attacked the wrong traveler who left him for dead."

"I think not, Peer, for everything has been taken from him except this tapestry. Even so, his vocation does not matter. He is in dire circumstances and needs our help."

I heard the man acquiesce, as though he were long used to the woman's queer requests. "Yes, M'lady. I will fetch your surgery."

His boots clumped off a little distance. It seemed like a good time to open my eyes.

There was no mistaking what I saw, and the shock nearly sent me back into a faint: the woman in the tower, Queen Adella. I had escaped Tintagel! Beside me lay the tapestry, rolled neatly.

Escaped! I thought and smiled at my fortune.

I tried to sit up. She pushed me down. "You have been injured. Lie still," she commanded. I did.

The man named Peer returned, carrying a mid-twentieth century doctor's medical bag, the kind used for house calls. He set it beside the woman, who opened it and took out a stethoscope and other modern medical accouterments. While she listened to my heart and took my pulse, I looked around. We were in a small glade in a forest. A river flowed beside us. Only she and the man were present. Peer was a giant, though, enough to take on ten men.

Queen Adella applied dressings to all my injuries.

She smiled at me. "You have lost a lot of blood, but none of your wounds are life-threatening. We will take you back to Enion. This clearing is not a good place for you to recuperate."

Peer picked me up as easily as he might have a baby. "Can you ride?" he asked. I nodded weakly. I knew I couldn't walk to Enion. But I was not ready to leave just yet.

"The tapestry," I croaked. My words sounded strange to me—a high pitched cackling.

"We will bring it with us," the Queen answered.

Peer carried me to the horses. They had a third one, a pack horse. The beast's burdens had been rearranged so that I could lie easily upon his back, supported by the equipment he carried.

When I was well situated, Queen Adella asked, "What is your name, traveler, and where do you hail from?"

I started to say my name, but the word would not come. I could not force myself to utter it and a great pain filled me when I thought of it. I began to fret at this and a dark suspicion grew in me. To cover, I asked for a mirror. Puzzled, she handed me one from her surgery. I looked at my image in horror; the face in the mirror was hideous. No longer the handsome, youngest son of Merlin Skye, I gazed upon the malformed features of the yellow dwarf Dad had woven into the Enion Tapestry. Terrified, I shoved the mirror away from me, but not before I saw beside my right eye a tiny crescent moon tattoo, silvery with a blue outline, identical to Dad's. Spying that mark saved my sanity. For with it came the comprehension that within me existed the power of the Shadowloom and its silver shuttle. It meant that I was a Shadow Weaver able to create worlds.

I reined in all my fears and took a chance that Dad had rearranged this world so that the

Yellow Dwarf was known. I told her, "If you search your memory, M'lady, you'll recall that you know me. My name is Graymalkin and I come from a village far on the other side of this forest, beyond even the mountain that rises above Enion."

Recognition passed over her features. "Yes, of course," she said. "I do know you. How silly to have forgotten." She looked at Peer, who was already nodding his head. He knew me too.

"There is something else," I said, trying to tone down the shrillness of my voice and succeeding partly but only with great effort. "An object as important as the tapestry. A silver weaving shuttle with which to create my work."

Peer said, "We searched the clearing when we first stumbled upon you. We found only this tapestry and you."

I quelled a feeling of terror. Without the shuttle I would be unable to reweave the Enion Tapestry. I would remain the Yellow Dwarf for eternity. "It has to be here. I saw it disappear ahead of me."

"Disappear?" Adella asked.

"Yes. I..." They looked at me strangely and I stopped. How could I explain to them what happened: that they were a part of a world constructed on a shadowloom...that Merlin and I fought...that the shuttle vanished into the tapestry, me diving after it, ending up in Enion...and that he had turned me into Graymalkin but left intact all my memories as his son? There was no way to describe my story that would not leave them thinking that I had gone mad.

So I said, "It is nothing, my Queen. My injuries...I am not thinking straight."

They accepted my explanation and took me to the palace.

Queen Adella took care of me. She was the one who granted me access to this room, not that I could do anything with the loom since I did not have the Ixtlan Shuttle.

I didn't know where you were. The Earth Tapestry was already on the loom. Shortly after I arrived, Macbeth and Morgan showed up. He had escaped Tharmis and gone to Thereon, where he rescued Morgan. Together, they braved the Umbra to find you. They hoped to be able to persuade their uncle to help them against Merlin. They were disappointed to find you vanished.

I told them that the Shuttle was lost somewhere in Enion. We searched for it, but could not find it.

We came up with a plan to use Merlin to unearth the Shuttle's location. He's attuned to it like you are.

I would pull threads from the castle, causing portions of it to fall. During the confusion, my brother and sister would enter Tintagel through the tapestry, kidnap our father and bring him here.

Only Merlin had escaped and you were knocked out. Apparently, you had fought Merlin and were pretty banged up. You were cut in dozens of places and your head was bleeding from where it slammed against something hard, perhaps the floor.

Morgan and Macbeth dragged you from the wreckage of the castle. You woke once or twice. You were delirious and didn't recognize us. It was apparent the blow to your head scrambled your brain.

We didn't have Merlin, but we had you. The problem was how to get you to help us. Macbeth devised a plan. Morgan would gain your confidence by helping you escape Thereon's slavers. She would bring you here. I would pose as your father. The rest you know.

. . . to be concluded next month

Mark Reeder currently works for Centre Communications as a writer researcher for educational videos. His short fiction has been published on the web at Deep Magic, Quantum Muse, and Dark Planet. The science fiction fantasy novel, "A Dark Knight for the King," co-authored by Ron Meyer, is available from Publish America as a POD through Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.com. He has a Master's degree in history from the University of Cincinnati and has studied the martial arts for thirty years. Mark lives in Boulder, Colorado.

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